RAMPAGE PRESENTS

REALMS OF FANTASY

Curtis 02291

www.rofmagazine.com

ADAM REX:
LAUGHING AT
FRANKENSTEIN

THE GOLDEN COMPASS
PHILIP PULLMAN'S
Fantasy Masterpiece
on the Silver Screen

NEW FICTION
Benjamin Rosenbaum
Josh Rountree
Elizabeth Bear
M.K. Hobson
Peni R. Griffin
Margaret Ronald

INTO THE FOG:
ICELAND'S LAND
AND LORE

FEBRUARY 2008

PLUS THE LATEST FANTASY GAMES, BOOKS, ART AND MORE!

$3.99US $5.99CAN
02>
0 09281 02291 6

RETAILER: DISPLAY UNTIL FEBRUARY 18

Ten stabs to the HeArt

Uncover your darkest fears and secret desires.

From internationally acclaimed and Printz Award–winning author

MARGO LANAGAN

comes a collection of beautiful and unsettling stories that will stay with you for a long time.

Whether you want them to or not.

AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

www.randomhouse.com/teens

Alfred A. Knopf RHCB

CONQUER THE EARTH

EMPIRE EARTH III

Choose from three custom factions with unique units and technologies.

Command all of human history and beyond.

Battle across the globe in your quest for world domination.

EMPIREEARTH.COM

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Mild Suggestive Themes
Language
Violence

THE WAY NVIDIA IT'S MEANT TO BE PLAYED

Games for Windows

mad doc SOFTWARE

SIERRA

© 2007 Sierra Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved. Empire Earth, Sierra and their respective logos are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Sierra Entertainment, Inc. in the U.S. and/or other countries. Mad Doc Software, Mad Doc®, the Mad Doc flask, and the Mad Doc logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Mad Doc Software, LLC. All rights reserved. The NVIDIA logo, GeForce and "The Way It's Meant To Be Played" logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation in the United States and/or other countries. Windows and the Windows Vista Start button logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the United States and/or other countries and 'Games for Windows' and the Windows Vista Start button logo are used under license. Certified on the XPS 720 & M1730. XPS is a registered trademark of Dell Inc. All other trademarks are property of their respective owners.

contents

departments

6 CONTRIBUTORS

8 MOVIES
By Resa Nelson
The Golden Compass is in good hands with writer/director Chris Weitz.

18 BOOKS
By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer
Michael Swanwick plays with myths, legends, fairy tales, and current politics.

30 FOLKROOTS
By Janni Lee Simner
Iceland's folklore is strongly connected to its landscape—and its fog.

76 GALLERY
By Karen Haber
With equal parts literary talent and artistic genius, Adam Rex heads for the top in the world of children's books.

82 GAMES
By Eric T. Baker
BioShock from 2K Games is easily one of the top 10 RPGs of all time.

ABOVE: The versatile and multitalented Adam Rex is the subject of this issue's Gallery. This painting of Adam's wife is entitled Dawn. *BELOW: The Boov invade Earth in Adam's new book,* The True Meaning of Smekday.

COVER: The Golden Compass, *written and directed by Chris Weitz, opens December 7. Courtesy of New Line Cinema.*

fiction

38 THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF THE EDELWEISS VILLAGE PUTT-PUTT GOLF COURSE *By M.K. Hobson*
The road to totalitarian despotism and to running dog capitalism is paved with nothing but the best of intentions. The fact that the road runs in a circle is not to be mentioned.

46 BLOOD AND OIL *By Josh Rountree*
Doing evil toward a good end is a recipe for disaster. But what happens if, by destroying the evil, you also destroy the good?

52 THE KING OF THE DJINN *By Benjamin Rosenbaum*
Perhaps one might wish to atract the attention of forces of the universe. Perhaps one might not.

56 HOBNOBLIN BLUES *By Elizabeth Bear*
Someone's trying to tell you something important. You'd better listen carefully. It may be your last chance.

62 AND SPARE NOT THE FLOCK *By Margaret Ronald*
Priests have flocks. Wolves have packs. How much difference is there, really?

68 THE SINGERS IN THE TOWER *By Peni R. Griffin*
Some wounds do not heal, some scars to do not fade, some hatreds never soften, some ghosts never die.

REALMS OF FANTASY (ISSN 1078-1951) is published bimonthly by Sovereign Media Co., Inc., 453 Carlisle Drive, Herndon, VA 20170, (703) 964-0361. Periodical Rate postage paid at Herndon, VA, and additional mailing offices.
REALMS OF FANTASY, Volume 14, Number 3 © 2008 by Sovereign Media, all rights reserved. Copyrights to stories and illustrations are the property of their creators. The contents of this publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without consent of the copyright owner. *Subscription Services, back issues, and information* call 800-219-1187 or write to REALMS OF FANTASY **P.O. Box 1623, Williamsport, PA 17703**. Single copies: $4.00, plus $1 for postage to Sovereign Media. Yearly subscription in U.S.A.: $16.95; Canada and Overseas: $21.95 (U.S.). Send editorial mail to REALMS OF FANTASY, **P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760**. REALMS OF FANTASY welcomes editorial submissions but assumes no responsibility for the loss or damage of unsolicited material. Material to be returned should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. We suggest that you send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Sovereign Media for our author's guidelines. **POSTMASTER: Send address changes to REALMS OF FANTASY, P.O. Box 1623, Williamsport, PA 17703.**

An Ancient Mirrors Tale

Legend: real or imagined?

In their demon-bound minds, fearful and powerful men consider Arcinaë, the last Damselfly, a threat to humanity. Hunted by those men, Arcinaë must set aside her docile nature to learn the skills of weaponry and war if she is to protect her unborn offspring and ensure the future of her race.

A new Ancient Mirrors adventure
from the author of *Dragon Queen* and *The Wrekening*
Available wherever books are sold

www.ancientmirrors.com

Synergy Books

Damselflies

Jayel Gibson

REALMS OF FANTASY
VOLUME 14 NUMBER 3

CARL A. GNAM, JR.
Editorial Director

SHAWNA MCCARTHY
Editor

LAURA CLEVELAND
Managing Editor

SAMANTHA DETULLEO
Art Director

DOUGLAS COHEN
Assistant Editor

Contributors:
Eric T. Baker, Elizabeth Bear, Peni R. Griffin, M.K. Hobson, Michael Jones, Resa Nelson, Margaret Ronald, Benjamin Rosenbaum, Josh Rountree, Janni Lee Simner, Paul Witcover, Jeff VanderMeer

MARK HINTZ
Chief Executive Officer

TINA POUST
Comptroller

KATHY PAULHAMUS
MARY NOLAN
SANDRA HILLYARD
Subscription Customer Service
(800) 219-1187

Curtis Circulation Company

Worldwide Distribution

Advertising Offices:
JEFF KIGHT
Advertising Director
(570) 322-7848, Ext. 117

DIANE BONIFANTI HINTZ
Director, Client Services
(703) 964-0361, Ext. 25

453 Carlisle Drive,
Herndon, VA 20170
703-964-0361 / FAX: 703-964-0366

Subscription Customer Service and Business Office
(800) 219-1187
1000 Commerce Park Drive,
Suite 300
Williamsport, PA 17701

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

contributors

Simner

JANNI LEE SIMNER writes fantasy and adventure stories for kids, teens, and adults. Her fourth children's book, *Secret of the Three Treasures,* was recently published by Holiday House; her first young adult fantasy, *Bones of Faerie,* will be published by Random House in 2009. She's also published more than 30 short stories, including appearances in *Gothic! Ten Original Dark Tales, Cricket* magazine, and *Chicks in Chainmail,* as well as in *Realms of Fantasy.*

M.K. HOBSON's short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* and many other fine publications. She lives in Oregon with her husband and daughter. She often visits her local miniature golf course—which features a big blue castle—but sadly, she's never been able to make par. You can find out more by visiting her website: *www.demimonde.com.*

Bear

ELIZABETH BEAR was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. She started writing science fiction and fantasy in first grade, but despite some early success in school literary magazines, she did not manage to make a career of it until she was into her thirties. Now she lives in Connecticut in a tiny apartment with a presumptuous cat, and spends her days typing like a fiend and cackling under her breath, alarming the neighbors. "Hobnoblin Blues" is her obligatory Rock And Roll Elf story. Everybody gets one.

Ronald

MARGARET RONALD grew up in rural Indiana and now lives outside Boston. She attended the Viable Paradise workshop in 2004 and is a member of BRAWL, a Boston writers' group devoted to science fiction and fantasy. Her fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons, Realms of Fantasy, Fantasy* Magazine, *Ideomancer,* and *Helix.*

PENI R. GRIFFIN is an Air Force brat, born on the now-defunct base at Harlingen, Texas. Her childhood was spent reading and taking long car trips, as she and her family moved from Texas to Alaska, Alaska to Iowa (while her father was in Nam), Iowa to Maryland, Maryland back to Texas. She came to San Antonio to attend two universities, from neither of which she graduated. They couldn't teach her how to make the stories in her head accessible to others. That, she learned by reading, and by writing. She sold her first short story in 1986, and her first book in 1989. Since then she has published stories in *F&SF, Realms of Fantasy, Asimov's,* and anthologies, and produced 12 books for young people, most recently *11,000 Years Lost* (Amulet, 2004). She lives in San Antonio with her husband and two cats.

BENJAMIN ROSENBAUM lives in Falls Church, Virginia, with his wife, children, and two ambitious, mildly crazy rats. His stories have appeared in *Asimov's, F&SF, Strange Horizons, Nature,* and *Harper's,* but this is his first appearance in *RoF.* Many of his stories are available online at *www.benjaminrosenbaum.com.*

Rountree

JOSH ROUNTREE lives and writes in Austin, Texas. His short fiction has appeared in various magazines and anthologies, including *Polyphony 6, From the Trenches, Lone Star Stories,* and previous issues of *Realms of Fantasy.* For the complete scoop, visit his website at *www.joshrountree.com.*

Moth

KIRIKO MOTH is an up and coming illustrator based in San Francisco. Her work is influenced by art nouveau, pop surrealism, and Japanese art. Her art has previously been published by small presses and she's working to break into the highly competitive but very satisfying field of sci-fi and fantasy art.

ALLEN DOUGLAS received a BFA in illustration from Syracuse University and immediately relocated to New York City after graduating to begin working as a freelance illustrator. After eight years in the City, his studio is now back in his hometown of Rochester, New York, on the southern shores of Lake Ontario. He currently teaches at the Rochester Institute of Technology and is a member of the Association of Science-Fiction & Fantasy Artists and the Society of Illustrators in New York.

Leonard

DAVID LEONARD's illustration has been called timeless by many art directors. This Lancaster, Pennsylvania, native has given in to the enchanting charms of Illustration. His bold, yet soft trace embodies strong concepts and a wit worth stopping for. His illustrations have lent a twist to many clients from corporate America to children's books to small businesses. Today, David lives between New York City, Scranton, PA, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with his wife, Anna, showcasing their talents. To view more of David's work please visit *www.davidleonard.com* and *www.hybridstudios.com.*

Designers of Swords & Medieval Weaponry

Knights Edge LTD.

Since 1994

FREE Full Color CATALOG within the USA $5 Elsewhere

We are one of the leading designers of weaponry spanning the timelines of history! Our exclusive lines include:

Ritter Steel® Hand Forged Functional Weaponry

Stage Steel® Battle Ready Steel Swords

Valiant Arms® Armour & Weaponry

Quality Swords, Armour, Helms, Crossbows, Banners, Dragons, Medieval and Oriental Weaponry, Chainmail, Jewelry, Figurines and more!

The Knights Edge Castle in Chicago, Illinois.

Knights Edge® Ltd. 5696 N Northwest Hwy. Dept RF54, Chicago, IL 60646 USA
773-775-3888 Fax 773-775-3339 www.KnightsEdge.com

DEALER INQUIRES WELCOME!

By Resa Nelson

The Golden Compass is in good hands with writer/director Chris Weitz.

If you haven't read *The Golden Compass*, you've probably heard of this first book in Philip Pullman's award-winning *His Dark Materials* trilogy. The movie version of *The Golden Compass* (from New Line Cinema) opens in theaters on December 7.

Director Chris Weitz (*About a Boy*) also wrote the screenplay. But why would a director best known for mainstream drama and comedy be interested in *The Golden Compass*? "I've always been a fan of fantasy," Weitz says. "I was a *Dungeons & Dragons* player. I grew up reading Michael Moorcock and Tolkien, of course. For the last few years, I've been adapting books I've really cared about. *The Golden Compass* and the rest of Pullman's work is very dense in terms of its intellectual and philosophical content, but it's also very powerful storytelling. It's got great, fun, cool stuff as well as the brainy, cerebral stuff. And that appeals to me."

The Golden Compass: Photos © 2007 Laurie Sparham/New Line Cinema

Pullman's story is one that's easy to love. Set in a parallel world, the story's hero is Lyra (played by newcomer Dakota Blue Richards), a 12-year-old girl whose parents died many years ago in an aeronautical accident up North. She lives at Jordan College in an England whose technology seems to be rooted in the past. "I know, because I've talked to [Pullman], that it is supposed to be 2007 in that world," Weitz says. "But in the way that it's written, there are some steampunk elements and some things feel like the 1930s or 1940s."

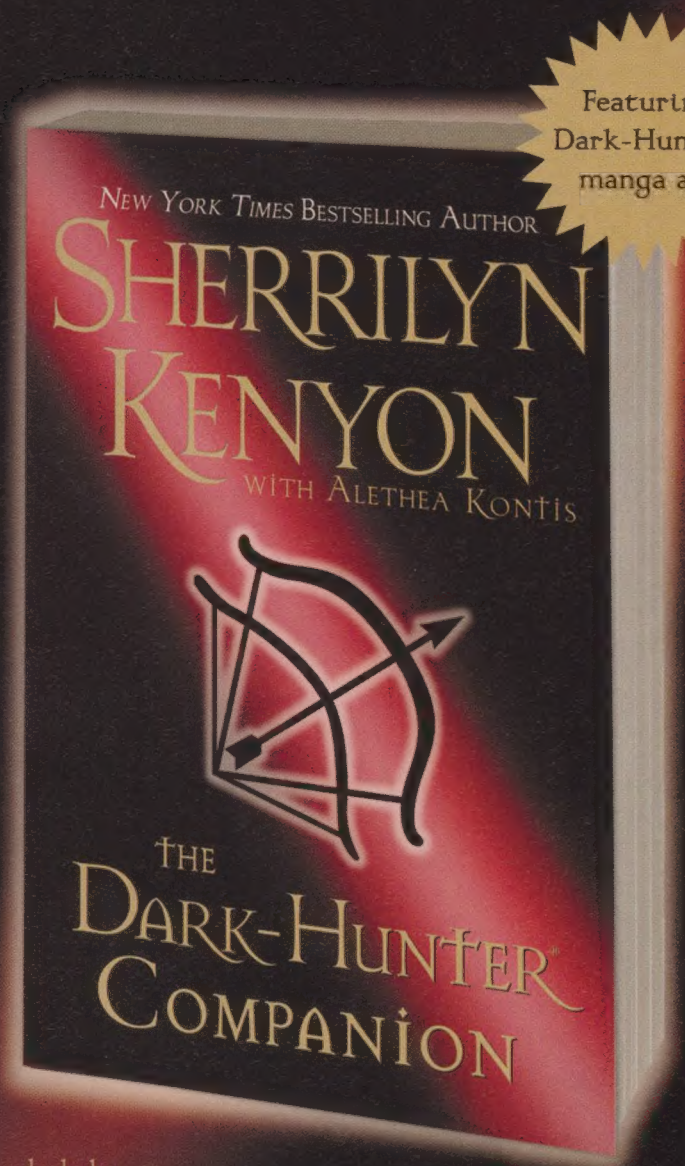
Lyra (Dakota Blue Richards) gazes at the alethiometer—the golden compass. RIGHT: Lyra's uncle, Lord Asriel (Daniel Craig), is determined to find a connection between this world and the many others running in tandem. TOP: Lyra is not sure Mrs. Coulter (Nicole Kidman) is who she seems to be.

IT'S WHAT YOU'VE BEEN CRAVING!

THE ULTIMATE GUIDEBOOK ON ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING DARK-HUNTER®!

FROM *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHERRILYN KENYON



Consider this handbook your education. Hunter 101. In *The Dark-Hunter® Companion* you'll find out all there is to know about being a Dark-Hunter.

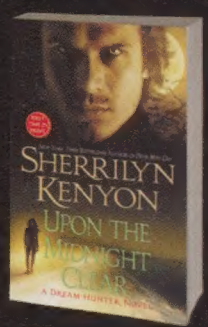
Features include:

- So Now You're a Dark-Hunter®...What to Do, What Not to Do, and How to Royally Screw It All Up
- Hunters Galore! Dark-Hunters®, Were-Hunters, non-Hunters and Squires
- Great Gods All Mighty: Dealing with Demons, Deities and All Other Things Immortal

From deleted scenes and an interview with Sherrilyn Kenyon, get ready to feast upon this informative and entertaining banquet of Dark-Hunter® delights!

dark-hunter.com
sherrilynkenyon.com
kenyonfearthedarkness.com

AND DON'T MISS THE NEW DREAM-HUNTER® NOVEL
Upon The Midnight Clear
Now available from St. Martin's Paperbacks



Available wherever books are sold

St. Martin's Griffin

Lyra never hesitates to speak her mind, get into a fight, or explore off-limits territory. "Because Lyra never had parents, she thinks no one can tell her what to do," Richards says. "She does things other people would be scared of, like climbing the roofs of Jordan College and getting into fights with people. She likes to give the impression that she is better than everybody else because she's braver and more intelligent."

The orphaned Lyra gives the impression that she is braver and more intelligent than anyone else.

When we first meet Lyra in Pullman's novel, she's exploring the Retiring Room, a place where she has no business. When the Master of Jordan College enters the room, Lyra quickly hides so she won't get in trouble. The Master poisons a bottle of wine intended for Lyra's uncle, Lord Asriel (Daniel Craig of *Casino Royale*). When Lord Asriel arrives, Lyra jumps into action to prevent him from drinking the poisoned wine, thereby saving his life. He's grateful but keeps her at a distance, like always. Theirs is not an easy relationship.

"Lyra wants parents like every child does," Craig says, "and the way that Lord Asriel behaves toward her is what forms Lyra and makes her into this wonderful human being that she's becoming. He is very tough with her, but he feels it's the only way to be because she's got to be as tough as he is. By the same token, her friendships and her connections become the most important thing in her life."

In the world of *The Golden Compass*, every human has one special and unique relationship—with his or her own daemon. Somewhat similar to Jung's definition of anima and animus in the world of psychology, a daemon is an opposite-sex spirit tied to its human. Therefore, Lyra's daemon is male (named Pantalaimon), and if they stray too far from each other, both human and daemon are wrenched with emotional pain. A daemon takes the form of an animal, and until the age of human puberty, the daemon can change shape at will. For example, Pantalaimon can

MIDSEASON TV PREVIEW 2008

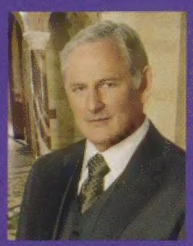
BY REESA NELSON

Not too long ago, TV series premiered religiously every fall and those that didn't make the cut were replaced by new

series lined up to debut in January. Thanks to cable TV, the landscape has changed during the past several years. Traditional networks have been experimenting with the scheduling of new episodes and reruns, and the trend is to begin a series either in the fall, early in the new year, or at the beginning of summer. Here are the TV series—both new and returning—slated to begin their runs in January or February.

Viewers will get the chance to choose a new character for *Heroes* by watching its six-episode spin-off series called **Heroes: Origins**, because each episode will introduce a new character. The character that receives the most viewer votes will become a *Heroes* regular. There's speculation that the spin-off series is a calculated attempt to keep viewers engaged during rerun season, but if the spin-off series is good, what's the problem?

Look for two new series on FOX this winter. First, **Sarah Connor Chronicles** is a TV spin-off of the *Terminator* movies. The series begins where *Terminator 2* ends, with Sarah and her son John on the run with the goal of keeping him safe until the day comes when he's destined to save humanity. The other new series is **New Amsterdam.** Sound familiar? That's because this series about an immortal man looking for true love was originally scheduled to begin in Fall 2007. But a little summer game show called *Don't Forget the Lyrics* became a hit, and sacrifices had to be made in order to fit it into the fall lineup. As a result, *New Amsterdam* was bumped to premiere this winter instead of last September.



On ABC, the new series **Eli Stone** promises to cross ghost whispering with courtroom drama. Eli Stone is a cold-hearted lawyer who gains the sudden and unexpected ability to see the dead. His doctor claims it's the result of an aneurysm, but Stone chooses to believe he has a new calling as a spiritual prophet in a three-piece suit.

Medium returns this winter, and Allison's world has changed because her secret is out. She's now exposed as a medium instead of working quietly behind the scenes with the D.A.'s office to capture killers.

The new season of **Lost** also begins this winter. Last season's finale gave us a tantalizing view of the castaways' future, in which Jack is back on the mainland but regrets leaving the mysterious island. Rumor has it that the character that betrayed his fellow passengers to save his son—Michael—will return to *Lost*.

Although **Jericho** was cancelled, a persistent campaign by its fans has ensured a second season. Look for the series to return in January—and congratulations to every viewer who fought the war to bring it back.

Each Card Brings A New Battle.

CYBERCODE–Unique glyphs that enable the PLAYSTATION®Eye to summon creatures to the Battle Mat

Summoning Cost–The amount of Mana needed to summon creatures to the Battle Mat.

Element Icon–Symbolizes the creature's elemental affiliation

Activation Cost–The Mana cost to rotate a creature or initiate attacks with previously summoned creatures

Set & Rarity Icon–Designates card rarity and which card set it belongs to.

Hit Points–Define the creature's toughness when placed on a neutral field

Infernal Sciondar Dragon
No.013
Infernal Sciondar Dragon's Attack is equal to 5 plus the number of other Fire creatures on the board.
While Infernal Sciondar Dragon is on a Fire field, its Activation Cost to attack is 3 less than listed.

Attack Power–Denotes the amount of damage this creature inflicts when attacking

Ability Text–Describes special abilities, applied benefits, restrictions and global effects

Tracking Icons–Markers that the PLAYSTATION®Eye tracks to determine each card's placement

Defense Zones Icon–Displays [illegible]

Attack Zones Icon–Indicates the direction(s) of attack and affected field(s)

take the form of a bird one moment and a mouse the next. But once puberty strikes, the daemon settles in the shape of one animal and must keep that shape until its death.

Pullman describes a daemon as, "The person themselves. They're not separate. They are part of them, so much so that if your daemon was a cat and a real cat came along, the real cat would look at your daemon as a human being rather than a cat." Pullman's daemons may have been influenced by the Greek word "diamon," which refers to a spirit that bridges the states of divinity and humanity.

Lord Asriel has returned from an expedition to the North, where he found evidence of parallel worlds in the form of a city suspended in the clouds among the Northern Lights. There's also news that the Pope has lost power to a new organization called the Magisterium, a collection of courts, councils, and colleges. Lord Asriel plans to return to the North, and Lyra longs to join him. But there's no place for her on her uncle's expedition.

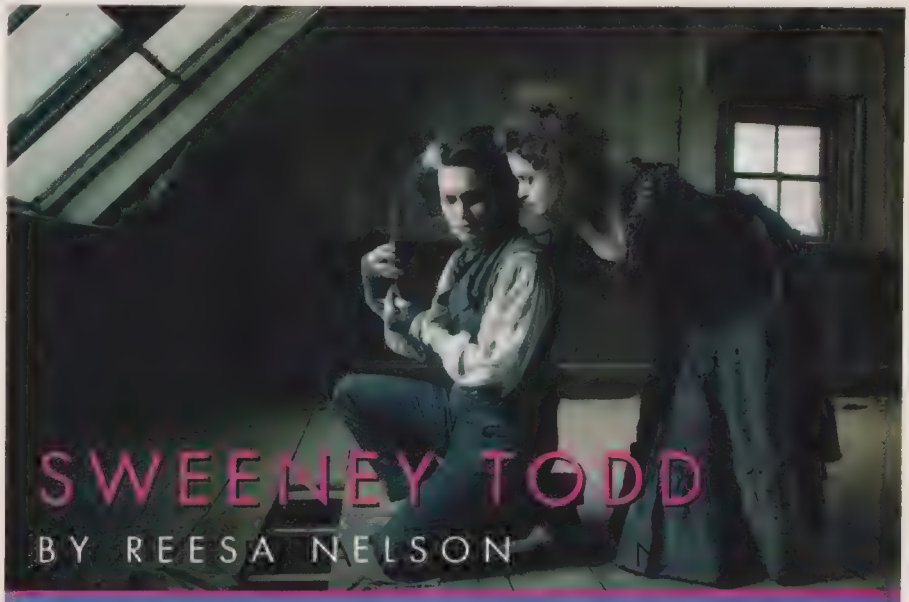
"He's an explorer and scientist," Craig says. "He has a mission. It's the most important thing, he thinks, in his life, and probably the most important thing in the history of the world that he lives in. He has discovered this connection between the worlds, and believes that there are millions and millions of worlds running in tandem, and that you can access these worlds if you know the way. And he is hell-bent on going out and finding out what it is, which is against the wishes of the Magisterium."

Meanwhile, children are disappearing, and no one knows why. Rumor has it that mysterious "Gobblers" are experimenting with children by cutting them into parts and stitching them back together. When Lyra's best friend (the kitchen boy Roger) disappears, she's horrified, convinced the Gobblers have taken him. Lyra vows to rescue Roger.

But Lyra soon meets Mrs. Coulter (Nicole Kidman of *Moulin Rouge, The Others*), a charming woman whose glamour dazzles Lyra. Before long, Lyra accepts an offer to become Mrs. Coulter's assistant and goes with her to London, where she soon hob-nobs with the elite.

Mrs. Coulter is a confounding character. One minute she seems to have Lyra's best interests at heart, and the next she comes across as a black-hearted villain. "I've obviously played characters before that have done despicable things," Kidman says about her role. "Rarely do you judge the character you're playing. You have to work from within and try to find the motivations as to why she feels that what she's doing is right, and you hope that her humanity bleeds through."

Before Lyra leaves Jordan College, she receives a strange parting gift from the Master, which she assumes belongs to Lord Asriel and needs to be returned to him. It's a bizarre device called an alethiometer that looks like a hybrid of a pocket watch and a compass, whose face is rimmed with dozens of tiny



SWEENEY TODD

BY REESA NELSON

Originally an award-winning musical thriller on Broadway, director Tim Burton brings Sweeney Todd into theaters on December 21 from DreamWorks Pictures and Warner Bros. Pictures. Benjamin Barker (played by Johnny Depp of *Pirates of the Caribbean*) is a man who seeks revenge after being sent to prison by an unjust and evil Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman of the *Harry Potter* movies). His imprisonment leads to a fall from grace for his wife, and his daughter ends up in the care of Judge Turpin. When Barker gets out of jail, he changes his name to Sweeney Todd and opens a barber shop with one thought in mind: to murder those who wronged him. The barber redeems himself for makes his victims feel at ease in the barber chair, and then uses his straight razor to cut their throats. He dumps the freshly killed bodies into a chute, sending them downstairs to his new sweetheart Nellie Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter of *Harry Potter* and the *Order of the Phoenix*). Nellie helps him get rid of the rest he murders by baking them into the meat pies she sells. Up until now, she's been known to sell the worst pies in London. Thanks to the new, special ingredients, her meat pies soon become the talk of the town. Meanwhile, the police who helped condemn Todd now has eyes for his killer's daughter. While Todd is checking off his list of victims, he still hopes to be reunited with his daughter, despite the fact that her new sweetheart is on his hit list.

Sweeney Todd opened in 1979 on Broadway and won eight Tony awards, including a win by Stephen Sondheim for best score. But the story of Sweeney Todd first appeared in one of London's "penny dreadful" newspapers in 1846, and first came to the stage the following year as *A String of Pearls: The Fiend of Fleet Street*. The playwright claimed it was based on fact, which may be true. A newspaper article published in the 1700s described an account of a murdering barber near Fleet Street. Then there was Sawney Beane of 15th-century Scotland whose family robbed passers-by, killed them, and then served them up for dinner. Likewise, police records in Paris listed murders in 1800 by a French barber in league with a pastrychef neighbor who cooked the bodies into meat pies.

It's been reported that the studios are asking Burton's more gruesome scenes in an effort to get a PG-13 rating. So don't expect too much gore in this concert movie.

And the EYE brings that battle to life.

With the PLAYSTATION®Eye, frenzied battles that once only took place in your mind are now a reality. Witness fire-breathing dragons and destructive machine monoliths coming to life on screen as you strategically place cards on the Battle Mat below. Unlock new creatures and advanced strategies with additional Summoning Cards. Compete online or in your living room. Against the PS3 A.I. or against your rival. And although you no longer need an imagination to play, you still need one to win. **www.EyeOfJudgment.com**

PLAYSTATION® EYE

Revolutionary CYBERCODE data read by the camera transforms each card into a monstrous creature on screen.

PLAYSTATION® NETWORK

In-depth rankings, tactical discussions and 24-hour competition on the most intense global battlefield.

PLAY BEYOND

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Fantasy Violence

"THE EYE OF JUDGMENT" is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. "PlayStation," "PLAYSTATION" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Wizards of the Coast and its logo are trademarks of Wizards of the Coast in the U.S.A. and other countries.

ONLY ON PLAYSTATION 3

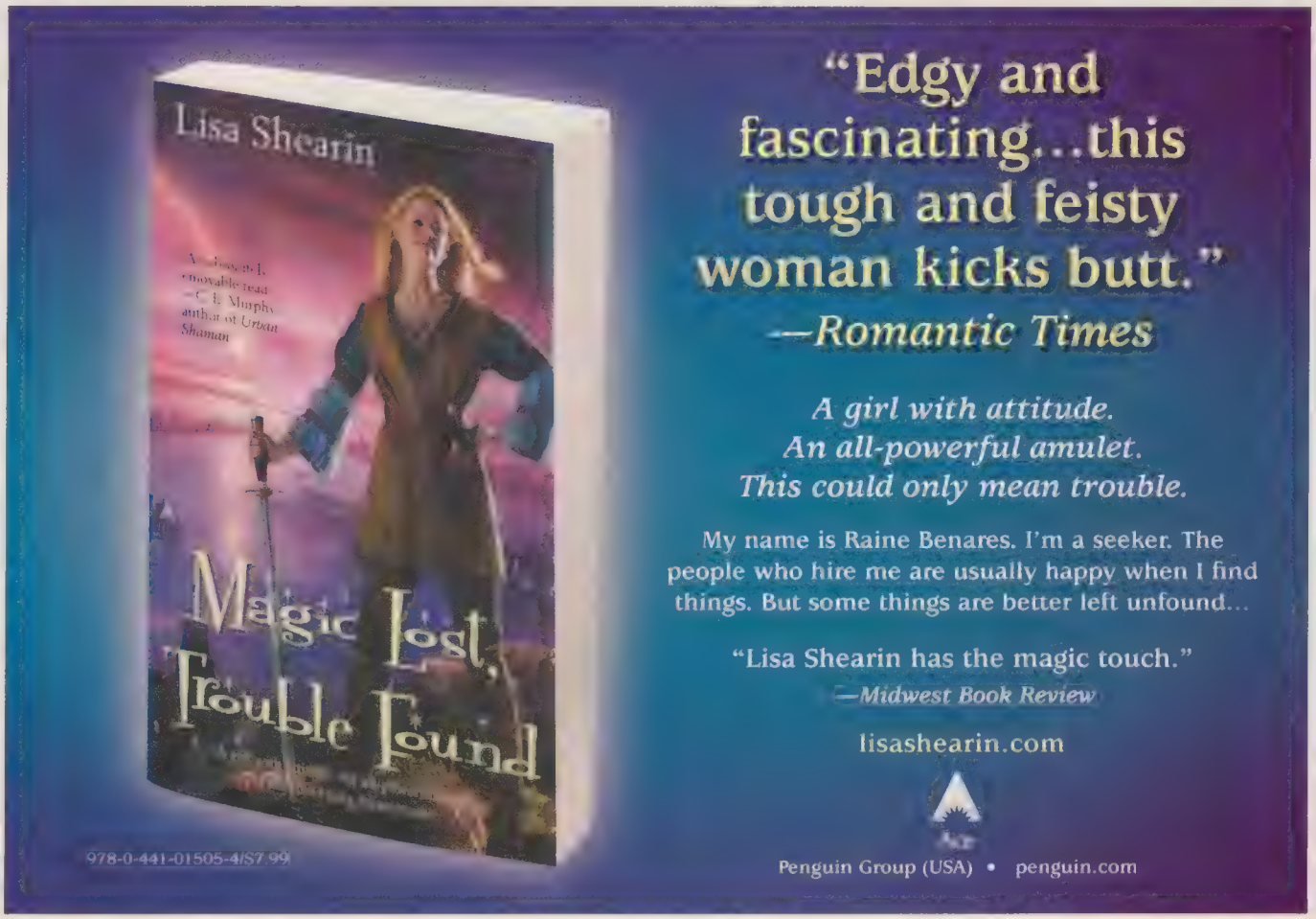
ABOVE: Lyra joins Gyptians John Faa (Jim Carter) and Ma Costa (Claire Higgins) on their journey to to rescue the children at Bolvangar. RIGHT: Lyra rescues Billy Costa (Charlie Rowe).

icons—the alethiometer is the golden compass. The Master tells Lyra that the alethiometer is an instrument that tells the truth. The trick is learning how to read it.

Eventually, Lyra learns that Lord Asriel has been captured and is being held prisoner by armored bears. Suspecting that Mrs. Coulter isn't who she appears to be, Lyra makes a bold escape and finds herself making unexpected friends, the most unlikely of which is a polar bear named Iorek Byrnison. When Lyra first meets Iorek, he's a rebel who has left his kind and now works for men in exchange for meat and alcohol. Even though he's a panserbjorne—an armored bear—men tricked him and stole his armor. Lyra's heart goes out to Iorek when she learns armor to a panserbjorne is what a daemon is to a human: part of one's soul. She strikes a deal with him. If Lyra can succeed in getting Iorek's armor back, he will help her in her quest.

"When she first sees him, she is kind of scared because he's really big, strong, and wounded," Richards says. "Iorek is the only person that Lyra lets be better than she is. He's the only person that she truly accepts to be bigger and stronger and braver than she is. She looks up to other people and understands that they're important, but he's the one exception to her idea that she's the best."

With the help of Iorek and other allies, Lyra


Lisa Shearin
Magic Lost, Trouble Found
978-0-441-01505-4/$7.99
"Edgy and fascinating...this tough and feisty woman kicks butt."
—Romantic Times
A girl with attitude.
An all-powerful amulet.
This could only mean trouble.
My name is Raine Benares. I'm a seeker. The people who hire me are usually happy when I find things. But some things are better left unfound...
"Lisa Shearin has the magic touch."
—Midwest Book Review
lisashearin.com
Penguin Group (USA) • penguin.com

By The Sword, Inc.

Quality Reproductions

Arms, Armor, Clothing and More

By The Sword, Inc. is one of the largest Medieval - Renaissance dealers in the U.S. carrying 1000's of exciting products. You can feel safe and assured ordering from our established firm. Our warehouse facilities allow our customers fast delivery on their orders! We've supplied major motion pictures, theme parks, Renaissance weddings, LARP events, theatrical plays, re-enactment groups and of course home decorators and collectors. We can accommodate any budget!

Order Toll Free: 877-433-9368

24 hours, 7 days a week!

Questions: 888-244-3263

Mon.-Fri. 9:00am-5:00pm est.

Visa-Discover-Master Card-American Express-PayPal

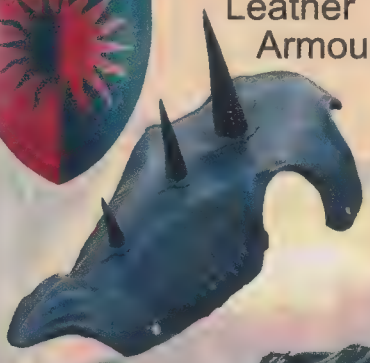
http://www.bytheswordinc.com

By The Sword, Inc. P.O. Box 07282 Ft. Myers, FL 33919

Historic Fantasy and Weapons

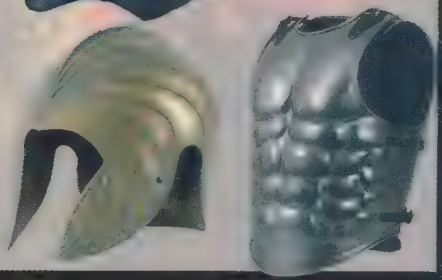
Shields

Battle Ready Leather Armour



Posters

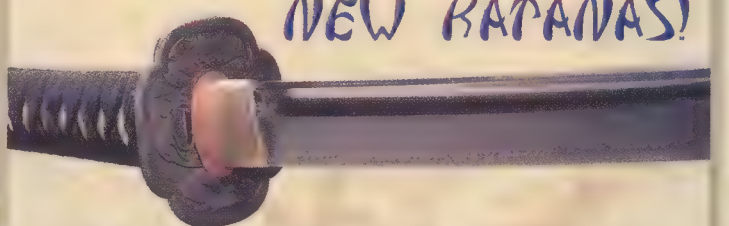
Figurines



Realistic LARP Armour

CLASSIC SAMURAI

NEW KATANAS!



Ronin Series

Samurai Series

Shogun Series

Dragon Series

- * Battle Ready Swords Great for Cutting
- * Fully Sharpened carbon steel blades
- * Heat-treated to a spring temper
- * Traditional sword fitting materials
- * Finely crafted black iron Tsubas
- * Genuine Ray Skin Samé
- * Traditional cord wrappings and Menuki
- * Includes Black Lacquered Wood Sheath
- * Dark Blue fully lined cotton sword bag

家明民

Available From

http://www.bytheswordinc.com

Toll Free 888-244-3263

Fax 239-433-9128

"And so," whispered the old Storyteller. "The tale begins...."

Great Fantasy From

Sheri L. McGathy

The Ancient One
ISBN: 1-55404-246-1 (ebook)
ISBN: 1-55404-246-1AU (audio)

The Birth of Spring
An Enchanted Storyteller Tale
ISBN: DOP1MCGTHY

THE SEASON OF GOLD
Elfen Gold Book One
ISBN: 1-55404-235-6 (print)
ISBN: 1-55404-236-4 (ebook)

THE SEASON OF SILVER
Elfen Gold Book Two
ISBN: 1-55404-261-5 (print)
ISBN: 1-55404-263-1 (ebook)

Thief Of Dreams
ISBN: 1-55404-240-2 (ebook)
ISBN: 1-55404-240-2AU (audio)

Within The Shadow Of Stone
ISBN: 1-55404-095-7 (print)
ISBN: 1-55404-110-4 (ebook)

Available From Double Dragon Publishing
www.sherilmcgathy.com

Texas aeronaut Lee Scoresby (Sam Elliott) joins the battle to recover the stolen children.

begins to learn the truth about Lord Asriel, Mrs. Coulter, and herself. There's a war in the making and mysteries abound. She forgets about Mrs. Coulter and focuses on rescuing Lord Asriel, finding her best friend Roger, and discovering what's at the heart of the onslaught of missing children.

Because the novel runs about 400 pages, some changes had to be made to the film. "[The movie is] certainly faithful to the spirit of [the novel]," Weitz says. "It's impossible to be faithful to the letter at all times. Inevitably you have to hone in on the scenes that are essential to the story. And sometimes in doing that, you link the scenes that you have with new scenes. Fortunately, because I've been in pretty constant contact with Pullman himself, we've been able to hand scenes back and forth when there were new things to do. Sometimes he would take a pass at it and I would modify it or vice versa, so I could get his Good Housekeeping stamp of approval. It's really cool, because I'm a huge fan of the books. Part of the fun for me has been getting to know one of my literary heroes.

"The challenge is always to keep the same tone as the books. In any kind of movie it's not simply rendering the action or knowing that you're going to have to get the daemons right, but actually getting the feel of the book right. That means maintaining the dialogue, making sure the script conveys to everybody who's going to be executing it—the director of photography, the production designer, and the costume designer—just what this world feels like. Pullman uses detail very specifically. He's incredibly descriptive about what the world looks like."

Although *The Golden Compass* is Weitz's first experience with CGI, he says that technology changes so quickly that anyone who directed a CGI movie 10 years ago could feel like a newcomer to today's digital effects. "You can point to a bunch of special effects-intensive movies that are essentially just things blowing up and monsters," Weitz says. "It all gets kind of tedious after a while. For me, each movie is really about the characters and what they're going through. It's eventually about human beings, whether they're in the form of human beings or polar bears or shape-shifting daemons. No matter how grand the canvas, this is a story about a child coming of age and about someone fighting against tremendous odds. And as a fan of fantasy and sci-fi, I knew I could tell when something was cool and exciting or when something was just a waste of pixels."

Odds are good that *The Golden Compass* is likely to meet or exceed the high standards established by *The Lord of the Rings* movies. "The bar is set pretty high by *Lord of the Rings*," Weitz says. "Peter Jackson very kindly invited me to go and look at his facilities when he was making *King Kong* and heard I was doing this movie. They really have an amazing crew of people out there working together for decades. That's an unprecedented achievement. What maybe this has that *The Lord of the Rings* source material doesn't have—without being slighting of Tolkien—is that it's a very serious story about very serious psychological and emotional issues. To integrate that with the epic scale we can bring to it and also with the kind of attention to detail that I'm crazy about and that production designer Dennis Gassner is crazy about, I think it can be something quite special. I knew from the very beginning that I wanted this to be a very beautiful film and a handmade kind of film, which sounds weird until you realize just how hard the visual effects guys work on every single frame of the picture. These guys are artisans and artists just as much as the guys who used to paint matte paintings back in the day were. The attention to detail is absolutely astonishing."

And what about the author who worked so closely with the filmmakers? "I've done my part," Pullman says. "I handed it over to Chris and his team to make the film. I couldn't have people to trust my story to who were more trustworthy, and I know my story is in good hands." ❧

SOME COMPANIES OFFER DUNGEONS. OTHERS, DRAGONS. BUT SINCE 1974, WE'VE BEEN THE ONLY COMPANY TO OFFER BOTH DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®.

OUR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE CONTINUES WITH THESE FINE PRODUCTS.

WIZARDS.COM/DND

All trademarks are property of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. ©2007 Wizards

GET TOGETHER. ROLL SOME DICE. HAVE FUN.

By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer

Michael Swanwick plays with myths, legends, fairy tales, and current politics.

Nowhere is the health of the speculative genre more evident than in the short story, which has found an outlet not only in magazines like this one but in the pages of the small and indie presses, as well as online. Lovers of fantasy have a lot to be thankful for—not least being the efforts of Michael Swanwick, who returns with a new collection, ***The Dog Said Bow-Wow*** (Tachyon Publications, San Francisco, trade paperback, 314 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-1-892391-52-0), containing sixteen stories, most of them as good as any he has ever written: indeed, no less than three (the title story, "Slow Life," and "Legions in Time") are Hugo winners.

This is one of the many fantastic illustrations in Brian Froud's World of Faerie, *a lavish new book from Imaginosis. See page 24 for more information.*

For our purposes, the stories of note are those set in a grimy, industrial version of Faerie that has been scoured clean of any remotely twee elements: a kind of steampunk fantasy. At first glance, "The Bordello in Faerie," in which a young man is tempted by magical lusts, or lustful magics, may seem closer to *Bored of the Rings* than to Tolkien, but only at first glance. In "An Episode of Stardust," a dwarf traveling by train listens to, and becomes part of, a story in which a fox with magical powers and a legalistic turn of mind both helps and haunts a "donkey-eared fey." These bawdy, tightly plotted tales will make you laugh out loud, but they don't shy away from deeper meaning.

This is doubly true of the three stories featuring Darger and Surplus, two charming rogues, the latter of whom is a genetically engineered dog. While technically science fiction, set in a "post-Utopian" world in which biotechnology has advanced almost miraculously and the electronic realm of information storage and communication has been rendered deadly by out-of-control AIs, these lusty stories are really fantasies that allow Swanwick ample room to play with old myths, legends, and fairy tales, as well as to comment upon the politics of the present day, which he does with considerable zest.

Next up is a novel by another prolific author of short stories, the 2004 Campbell Award winner, Jay Lake. Lake's new novel, ***Mainspring*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 320 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1708-7), the first of a duology, features a truly audacious idea, one of those grand literalizations of metaphor for which fantastic fiction is both celebrated and derided. But rarely has it been employed on the scale that Lake attempts here.

We are all familiar with the model of the clockwork universe, in which God, or some divine engineer, has placed the planets in their courses, established the laws of physics, etc., then, having set the complex mechanism in motion, stepped back behind the curtain, his presence no longer necessary. Lake envisions a clockwork version of our world in which the tracks and gears along and by which the planet moves within the orrery of the solar system are visible, physical objects. Lake's Earth is a "made" world, part of a vast construct that seems, quite literally, endless: the ultimate Big Dumb Object. Of course, many otherwise rational people believe that we live within just such a construct now, but Lake's is a purely mechanistic one, an artifact that would not be out of place in a steampunk novel.

Lake's globe is divided by a towering equatorial wall, to the south of which lies romance, magic, mys-

REALMS OF ADVENTURE . . .
REALMS OF MAGIC . . .
REALMS OF POSSIBILITY

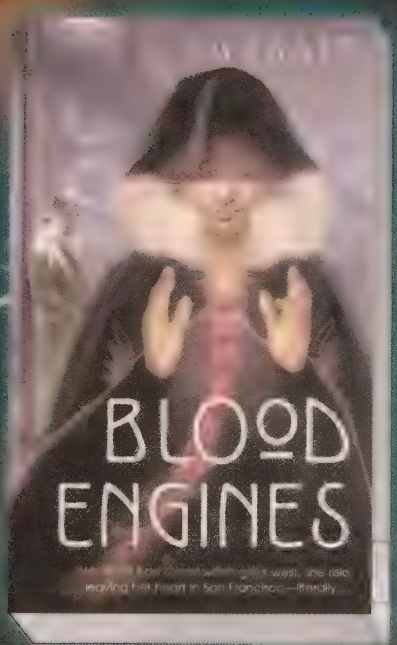
"Stunning. . . . Campbell has Neil Gaiman's gift for lushly dark stories and compelling antiheroes." —***Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review**

Suspended by chains over an abyss, the city of Deepgate holds the fate of three tortured souls: one who kills for immortality, one who falls from grace—and one who rises for revenge.

"Extraordinary . . . no summary can do justice to the bedazzling intricacies on bountiful display here." —***Kirkus Reviews***

Journey into a secret garden where a young orphan girl weaves bewitching tales of hedgehog warriors and winged skeletons, clockwork women and sparrow calligraphers, in a lavishly illustrated collection of marvels and mysteries.

The magic continues. The fantasy never ends.
THE ORPHAN'S TALES
IN THE CITIES OF COIN AND SPICE
CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE
AUTHOR OF IN THE NIGHT GARDEN



"A fast-paced, thoroughly fun, satisfying read."
—Kelley Armstrong

Meet Maria Mason: a smart, saucy, and only slightly wicked witch of the East Coast. Under attack by her nemesis, Maria runs to San Francisco for a powerful artifact . . . and learns what trouble *really* is.

Wherever books are sold
Visit www.SpectraBooks.com to sign up for Spectra Pulse, our free eNewsletter

tery, and to the north of which a civilization that seems roughly analogous to 19th-century Europe and America in terms of history and technology, though with important differences: a Catholic church that worships the "Brass Christ," crucified on the "Roman horofix," and prays rather clunkily to "Our Father, who art in Heaven/Craftsman be thy name," and a British Empire that has not lost its American colonies and is locked in a struggle for dominance with China. Lake drapes his alternate but not unfamiliar history, sufficiently grounded in real-world events to preclude the need for lengthy exposition, over his equally familiar but far more radical world design, so that the latter seems less strange than it really is; there are stretches in which readers can forget that they are not reading a throwback to some adventure novel by Burroughs, with David Innes cruising in a dirigible high above the jungles of Pellucidar.

But while Lake tips his hat to Burroughs, and other writers of the genre's past, he's also paying homage to that modern giant of SF, Gene Wolfe. His hero, apprentice clockmaker Hethor Jacques, is named after a character in Wolfe's *New Sun* series (his surname is that of a 19th-century American clockmaker), and Wolfe's concern with Christianity, hierarchical systems, nested realities, and inescapable destinies is everywhere present in *Mainspring*. Hethor reminded me very much of Able, the hero of Wolfe's *Wizard Knight* duology, who is also visited by angels, and of Silk, from the *Book of the Long Sun*, who is driven by a similar sense of divine obligation. Yet unlike almost anything by Wolfe, the experience of reading *Mainspring* was for the most part about as engrossing as watching the hands of a clock complete a full revolution.

Perhaps Lake wanted to give his book the reliability that distinguishes a good timepiece, but a good novel is not a timepiece; it's something like the opposite of a timepiece. From the moment the angel Gabriel appears to Hethor on page one and informs him that "the mainspring of the world winds down" and that "only you, Hethor," can fix it, Hethor's destiny is wound as tightly, and progresses as inevitably, as that of a clockwork automaton (which in fact he may be). Hethor has been tasked with finding the Key Perilous, an all-but-mythical artifact that will set the ailing mainspring to rights. But there is no drama to his search, apart from incidental events that seem to occur without rhyme or reason yet nevertheless serve to advance him toward his goal, doling out plot coupons along the way.

Every so often, the metal gears of the underlying clockwork shine through the surface of Hethor's world, giving readers tantalizing glimpses of the book that Lake must have envisioned and strained to bring into being. There are moments, especially when the airship on which Hethor travels reaches the equatorial wall, when a sense of imminence swells up, as if the curtain is about to be drawn back, revealing some essential secret about Hethor and his world: a secret that will illuminate our world in turn, our relationship to a savior and a creator. But it never happens. The book ticks on to its foreordained close, in which Hethor plays a predictably Christ-like part that seems no more freely willed than any other action he has taken. Perhaps that is the point, but it's a tedious one. It's hard to see how the next volume, *Escapement*, can repair this broken *Mainspring*.

Another Christ-like figure, and a far more original one, looms large in Michael Cisco's brilliant, bleak, and dourly amusing new novel, ***The Traitor*** (Prime Books, trade paperback, 156 pp., $12.95, ISBN: 978-0-8095-7235-9). If Samuel Beckett had immersed himself in Lovecraft and then set out to write a horror novel, the result might approximate this short but dense and powerful gospel of a dark savior as related by the tormented man who serves him in the capacities of both John the Baptist and Judas.

Noptha is a spirit-eater, a man who possesses the ability to devour souls and ghosts, and to use the accumulated energy in magical acts of constructive or destructive effect. He works for the Alak, the conquering rulers of his country, a race of Quiet Americans who "rule[ ] not because they are the best of all people, but [are] the best of all people because they [have] been selected to rule." Noptha thinks nothing of betraying his own people to the Alak, and in doing so convinces himself that he is betraying the Alak in turn: it is the act of betrayal, rather than its object, that he embraces. Ordered to apprehend a soul-burner named Wite—soul-burners are spirit-eaters who store up vast quantities of spirit power and use it for selfish reasons, which means reasons that are their own rather than those of their Alak masters—Noptha instead helps Wite to escape and joins him as a kind of disciple.

It develops that Wite is returning to his native country of Heipacth, where his cousin Tzdze lives; there, in a stone house on the side of a towering mountain, Wite intends to kill himself. This suicide, agonizingly prolonged and then grotesquely enacted through another betrayal, or what seems like one, is the pivot of the novel, after which Noptha goes forth as a fugitive, tasked with spreading the word-virus of Wite's ascendance to a grim, bloodthirsty godhood. The novel, purporting to be the last testament of Noptha before his execution by the Alak, is itself a means of infection: writing it for us is, in a very real sense, not a confession but instead a final betrayal, the most savage of all.

Noptha is not a writer; he is not gifted with words. But Cisco is. And he does not merely portray Noptha: he inhabits him. It's an extraordinary effort of authorial effacement, because Noptha's embittered and exacting mind is a repugnant one, yet Cisco invests it with flashes of unexpected, hyperbolic humor, like the humor in Kafka, apt to give rise to a grimace rather than a smile, and with a peculiar poetry. Yes, poetry. Noptha is so focused on not being misunderstood, in communicating exactly what he means, that he repeats himself, relentlessly shaving away ambiguities in his words, and this gives his paragraphs and sentences a hypnotic rhythm that has a powerful cumulative effect. Of course, he fails; words can only be so precise; but his failure is Cisco's success, an artistic triumph of a high order.

Christ-like figures have been a notable feature of Gene Wolfe's novels for some time. Wolfe is a Catholic, and Christianity is often present by implication or allegory in his fiction, whether called by that or some other name, yet I can't recall Wolfe ever incorporating his religion as overtly into a novel as he does in ***Pirate Freedom*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 320 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1878-7). That alone makes this deceptively breezy book a significant one for avid readers of this fascinating writer. Beneath the irresistibly sun-splashed surface of a boy's own adventure story set aboard pirate ships cruising the Caribbean in the early 18th century is a novel that raises profound questions about faith, religion, and the consequences of attempting to discern, and live in accordance with, God's will and Christ's example. It's a haunting book, a surprisingly dark book, whose shadows counterpoint the Caribbean sun, a book I found distasteful in many ways. It is also a small masterpiece.

If a believing Catholic writes a novel in which the only fantastic elements derive directly from the Catholic God, can the novel really be termed a fantasy? If the author believes that no miracle is beyond God, and he employs a miracle as the centerpiece of his plot, then, no, in my opinion the novel cannot be called a fantasy, at least not in the sense that we normally use the word. *Pirate Freedom* is a novel of many deceptions, but perhaps the greatest of them is that it pretends to be this kind of novel, for it seems at first blush to offer no other signs of the fantastic beyond the inscrutable act of God that flings the hero/narrator/author, Chris, three centuries back in time, only to return him to a present some years in advance of that from

whence he originally departed. Yet on closer examination, we see that the near future (in our terms, not his) from which an older but scarcely wiser Chris is writing the words we are reading is not a future that could have grown from our present, even though it shares significant aspects of our past. In this future, close enough at hand that it is pegged to the collapse of the communist regime in Cuba, which seems likely to occur in our world within the next ten or perhaps twenty years, there is a monorail system linking the cities of the East Coast; in this future, genetic engineering has reached a point where parents can and do preselect the physical endowments of their children. Chris is such a child: he refers to himself as a "half-human monster." Do half-human monsters possess God-given souls? We shall see. But the point I wish to make here is that for all its seeming straightforwardness, Wolfe has built a back door into his narrative that makes his world, and especially the past in which the bulk of the action takes place, despite its historical verisimilitude, as fantastic a creation as Narnia ... with the added twist of possessing all the delightfully maddening Escher-like structural peculiarities and puzzles of time-travel paradox.

Pirate Freedom is also notable in that the Chris who is our narrator is a Catholic priest, and as such seems to stand in a much closer relationship to the author than many of Wolfe's other narrators. It's always dangerous to proclaim a character as a surrogate for the author, but I felt very strongly as I read that Wolfe was telling his spiritual autobiography through this character's adventures.

The novel is quite literally a single, long confession. It is written by Chris for a nameless man, a murderer, who came to him for confession and absolution. In the course of the sacrament, which Wolfe refers to only obliquely, Chris apparently mentioned that he too was a murderer. Some time later, the man (Wolfe?) returns and requests the full story from the priest, which he agrees to give him in the form of a letter. It's easy to forget, as the story leaps ahead like a ship with a strong wind at its back, that *Pirate Freedom* is the confession of a murderer.

In telling the story of the murder he committed, Chris goes much further afield, relating the full panoply of the rousing adventures he experienced as a younger man, when he miraculously slipped three hundred years back through time to the early 18th century and became a pirate. To avoid confusion, I'm going to refer to this Chris as Chris1. The other Chris, the author of the confession, I will refer to as Chris2. But of course they are the same Chris, even though, due to the vagaries of time travel, they occasionally overlap in space, in ways I will leave readers to discover, but which are highly important not only to the plot but to the moral dimension of the narrative. Readers should not allow themselves to be distracted by the exploits of Chris1. Always ask yourself: where is Chris2, and what is he doing?

Chris1 is born in New Jersey to a mobster who, upon the fall of the Cuban communists, travels to Havana to run a casino. This occurs when Chris1 is ten. No mother is mentioned, and indeed there may not be a mother at all, if Chris1 is, in addition to being genetically engineered, a clone; this is an explosive possibility that raises the question of whether there might be a Chris3; perhaps this Chris3 is even the man Chris2 is addressing his confession; and perhaps this Chris3, this wiseguy, is present under a different name in the adventures of Chris1. It's an intriguing puzzle that, as far as I can see, has no definite answer; but it can't be entirely dismissed for that reason. At any rate, Chris1's father, no doubt to protect him, places him in a local monastery, and it's there, after perhaps seven years, that Chris1, faced with the decision of whether to enter the monastic order or not, chooses to leave and go in search of his father, whom he hasn't seen or heard from in years. It's at this point, when he leaves the monastery, that Chris1 discovers he has traveled in time.

In short order, Chris1 joins a ship's crew, where, despite fighting back, he is brutally raped twice by his fellow sailors before the captain intercedes—an experience that does not leave Chris2, later, with any empathy for teenage victims of sexual abuse at the hands

PARAWORLD ZERO
by Matthew Peterson

Pre-Order now and get the FREE AUDIOBOOK!
Visit the website for more details
www.ParaWorlds.com/rof

Twelve-year old earthling, Simon Kent, stumbles upon a secret that thrusts him into a bizarre adventure filled with magic, technology, and deadly out-of-this-world creatures. He discovers a true friend, confronts his inner demons and becomes the savior to a peculiar race of people, when all he truly wants is to find his way back home.

[illegible] dumpsters. Funny and [illegible]
– Maria V. Snyder
award-winning author of Poison Study

"Truly Original. Read it. Trust me, you'll have a terrific time."
– Douglas Hill
bestselling author of nearly 70 books

"The exciting action of Star Wars with the humor of Napoleon Dynamite."
– Diana Pharaoh Francis
author of the Path and Crosspoint series

Available January 2008
ISBN 978-1-59092-491-4
Blue Works

GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

BY JEFF VANDERMEER

Sardine in Outer Space Vols. 1–4, Emmanuel Gilbert and Joann Sfar, First Second, New York, trade paperback, 118/121/102/102 pp., $12.95, $13.95 (Vol. 4), ISBNs: 978-1-59643-126-3, 978-1-59643-127-0, 978-1-59643-128-7, 978-1-59643-129-4. Brawling, sprawling, silly, bursting with color, and highly imaginative, the *Sardine in Outer Space* series has given two French geniuses, Gilbert and Sfar, carte blanche to create a classic pirate adventure, now concluding with Volume 4. Featuring Captain Yellow Shoulder, Little Louie, Doc Krok the Mad Scientist, Supermusclesman (chief executive dictator of the universe), and, of course, Sardine and her little black cat-creature, the series has given readers the shivery delights of flesh-eating tattoos, kidnapped suns, a space boxing championship, intergalactic yogurt thieves, and a space Santa Claus. The sense of play involved isn't as ironic or in-jokey as something like *Futurama*, and in many ways that's a relief. We're left to root for Sardine as she falls in and out of danger due mostly to the shenani-

MICHAEL WHELAN

An Original Limited Edition Lithograph

"PATH'S END"

Path's End Many Years Ago, The Fantasy 500 Collectors Consortium commissioned Michael Whelan to produce 500 signed prints of Path's End. We have what we think are the last few remaining prints in the world Signed and Numbered.

Created on 100% cotton archival paper, utilizing up to twenty colors of special light fast inks, each lithograph is signed and numbered by Michael Whelan.

For a limited time these prints are being offered at the substantially reduced price of $195, including shipping and handling.

To order, telephone toll free:

1-800-219-1187

Visa and MasterCard are accepted. To order by mail, send your check, money order or credit card number (please include expiration date and signature) to the address below.

SOVEREIGN COLLECTIONS
1000 Commerce Park Drive, Suite 300,
Williamsport, PA 17701

gans of Doc Krok and the aforementioned Supermuscleman. In Volume 4, space leeches, cosmic squid, and talking clouds come into play, making for a grand finale indeed. Rest assured for those who prefer fantasy to SF, there's nothing particularly futuristic about *Sardine*. It's pure make-believe with a level of invention that kids and their parents alike can savor.

Flight 4, Kazu Kibuishi, Villard, New York, NY, trade paperback, pp. 344, $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-345-49040-7. This stunning fourth installment in the critically acclaimed series is a must-have for anyone who loves fantasy art and comics. Perhaps the best volume yet, *Flight 4* features amazing work by Michael Gagne and a host of others. From strange creatures to beautiful landscapes, from fantasy cities to elephant-drawn hot air balloons, the anthology has something for everyone. The stories are excellent, too, with the ingenuity of Gagne's wordless creation matched up against "The Story of Binny" by Lark Pien, in which a boy finds an odd mammal that is both winsome and sinister. The styles of art vary from whimsical to hard-edged, with stories that run the gamut from humorous to serious. It's difficult to say which is more impressive: the range of material or the quality of it. I don't see how anyone could resist this beautiful volume.

Korgi: Book 1, Christian Slade, Top Shelf, Marietta, GA, trade paperback, 84 pp., $10.00, ISBN: 978-1-891830-90-7. Another timeless classic in the making, *Korgi* reads like a kinder, gentler Maurice Sendak. It features a girl and her korgi (or "corgi" if you prefer that spelling) having a series of fantastical adventures and overcoming trolls and other beasties. The korgis in this book are also fantastical, with their own community in the trees. The illustration in this wordless tale is exceptional, almost with the quality of etchings. I'm not really that susceptible to the "cute" factor, but I have to say I fell for this book hook, line, and sinker. It's such a great gift for kids or adults. ❧

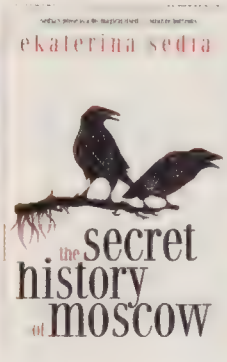
AVAILABLE IN ALL GOOD BOOKSTORES

THE SOLARIS BOOK OF NEW FANTASY
Edited by George Mann

A short story anthology of the highest order showcasing the talents of some of the best loved names and hottest new writers in the fantasy genre. Including new works by Janny Wurts, Hal Duncan, Juliet E. McKenna, Steven Erikson, Lucius Shepard, Mike Resnick, Mark Chadbourn and many others.

For more information and free first chapters visit
WWW.SOLARISBOOKS.COM

of Catholic priests. This shocking inability to judge others by the light of his own experiences, and to grant to others the same charity that he has benefited from, is one of Chris's most repugnant traits, enduring through time. Despite becoming a priest and professing at all times an intent to do God's will, both Chrises avail themselves of the consolations of hypocrisy in order to justify repeated crimes and sins such as murder, theft, and adultery. Chris—both of him—is a supreme egotist with a hair-trigger temper and a prickly sense of honor and entitlement. He is not entirely without conscience, and he fitfully attempts to help or free slaves when he encounters them (including a man who may be the original of Crusoe's Friday), but he is also complicit in selling them.



Yet God has chosen him, sent him back in time, and then forward again, for some purpose. What could it be? The motivation that drives the Chrises, as so many of Wolfe's characters, is love for a woman who is herself no paragon of Christian virtue, but rather a murderess, adulteress, and liar. Can that love transcend its trashy origins, become something closer to the love that Christ displayed in His life and death? That is the question *Pirate Freedom* poses with panache and pursues as if it were a Spanish galleon ripe for the plucking.

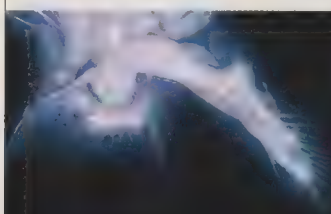
I turn with relief from the knotty conundrums of Wolfe to a witty and enthralling debut by Joe Abercrombie. ***The Blade Itself*** (Pyr, New York, trade paperback, 432 pp., $15.00, ISBN: 978-1-59102-594-8), the first in a trilogy, is both a dashing throwback to the kind of urbane, page-turning sword and sorcery practiced to perfection by Fritz Lieber, simultaneously celebrating and gently satirizing, and a gritty, character-driven fantasy of the post-Tolkien mold reminiscent of Martin and Erikson in its relish for mud and blood.

Abercrombie's novel suffers in places from hurried pacing, which leads to abrupt narrative gaps, but on the whole these are forgivable because the story and characters are so gripping. The characters especially, brought to life through vivid interior monologues: Inquisitor Glotka, an embittered victim of the tortures he now visits on others, who is the most interesting torturer to appear in speculative fiction since Gene Wolfe's Severian; Captain Jezal dan Luthar, a foppish officer whose ambitions as a fencing champion are less about glory than about petty personal revenge; Logen Ninefingers, a barbarian in the Conan mold who has achieved with age a kind of sullen wisdom yet harbors within himself a force of violent destruction akin to that residing within one Bruce Banner. There is even a wizard, a kind of anti-Gandalf called Bayaz.

The plot itself is fairly generic, with nameless evils gradually drawing nigh, causing Bayaz to manipulate the above characters, and others, into an unwilling and volatile fellowship, but its familiarities are cleverly handled, and Abercrombie's fight and battle scenes are among the best I've read anywhere.

Paul Witcover

The Secret History of Moscow, Ekaterina



From the Magical Mind of Brian Froud

Froud fans, rejoice! The long-awaited sequel to the best-sellers *Faeries* and *Good Fairies/Bad Faeries* has just been published by Imagi-nosis. WORLD OF FAERIE, a stunning, full-color, 196-page coffee-table book, contains large numbers of both new and old paintings from the master himself. It is a must-have for longtime admirers and an excellent introduction to Froud's deeply imagined world.

Brian Froud takes you on a very personal and insightful journey through his 30-year career, uncovering secret inspirations and deep-felt emotional reactions to the world around him. He writes: "I look for the sacred in the landscape, I search for meaning or just for an interesting stone that has a message; or a twig, runelike in form, that will point to treasure. I am always looking for faeries but some days I would settle for finding Excalibur."

One of the first stops on the WORLD OF FAERIE journey is Brian's studio via a giant fold-out photograph complete with books, paints, artifacts, and other bits of fascination. Wendy Froud, Brian's wife, provides some insight into what goes on in the studio, and Brian pays tribute to Arthur Rackham.

Aspiring artists and fans of faerie alike will read with interest about the artistic and literary inspirations for Brian's work, including Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and many more.

Readers also get a glimpse into Brian's creative process. He writes: "For me the beginning is a response to land, to place, to mysteries that require form and voice. Then shapes emerge in my sketchbooks." He describes his attraction to small moments rather than epic occurrences: "Usually something has just happened or is just about to happen, but the viewer always wants to know what, and so is invited into the picture and becomes, through the curiosity, part of an unfolding story."

As in the *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy* series, there are three smaller booklets pressed inside WORLD OF FAERIE: the first is a glimpse of Neverland and clues to finding it, the second, symbols of the alchemical process of transformation, and the third on green women and phyllomantic men. In a pocket at the back of the book is a poster containing a poem by Neil Gaiman with artwork by Brian and Wendy Froud.

The eloquent Ari Berk provides an insightful foreword to WORLD OF FAERIE that should be read both before and after perusing its contents. He writes: "For Brian, Faerie is not fantasy, but reality. In his work—as in moments of joy and laughter, in merriment and memory and mourning, in longing and loss—Faerie is present." Both Berk and Froud speak against the commercialization of faeries. Berk writes: "Despite this trend, Brian has held his ground, continuing to paint what he has learned, what he sees, and what he wishes to see with the tools of an artist."

Those who do believe owe a debt of gratitude to Brian Froud.

Sedia, Prime Books, New York, NY, trade paperback, 304 pp., $20.00, ISBN: 978-0-8095-7223-6.

Every couple of years a unique voice comes out of nowhere with something either completely original or a new riff on old material. Ekaterina Sedia's *The Secret History of Moscow* is more of a renovation than an innovation, but it's no less impressive for being familiar at times. Sometimes there is truth in a title and Sedia's fiction does indeed provide a secret history for the city of Moscow, including underground mysteries, exiled deities, and beasts out of folktales. Set in contemporary Russia, the plot follows Gelina in her search for her sister Maria, who has turned into a white jackdaw and flown away. Enlisting the aid of a policeman named Yukov, who is investigating a series of disappearances, Gelina uncovers a Moscow far stranger than anyone could imagine. It may seem contradictory to think of a sense of wonder as being practical, but *The Secret History of Moscow* is in some ways a very practical book with a marvelous sense of wonder. It has a sensibility that makes the impossible seem probable, and a prose style that can be menacing and dangerous in one sequence and laconically funny in the next. Sedia's novel is not just one of the most assured debuts of the year, but a highlight of the year—quirky and yet accessible, for fans who like Neil Gaiman and Charles de Lint as well as those who prefer darker fare.

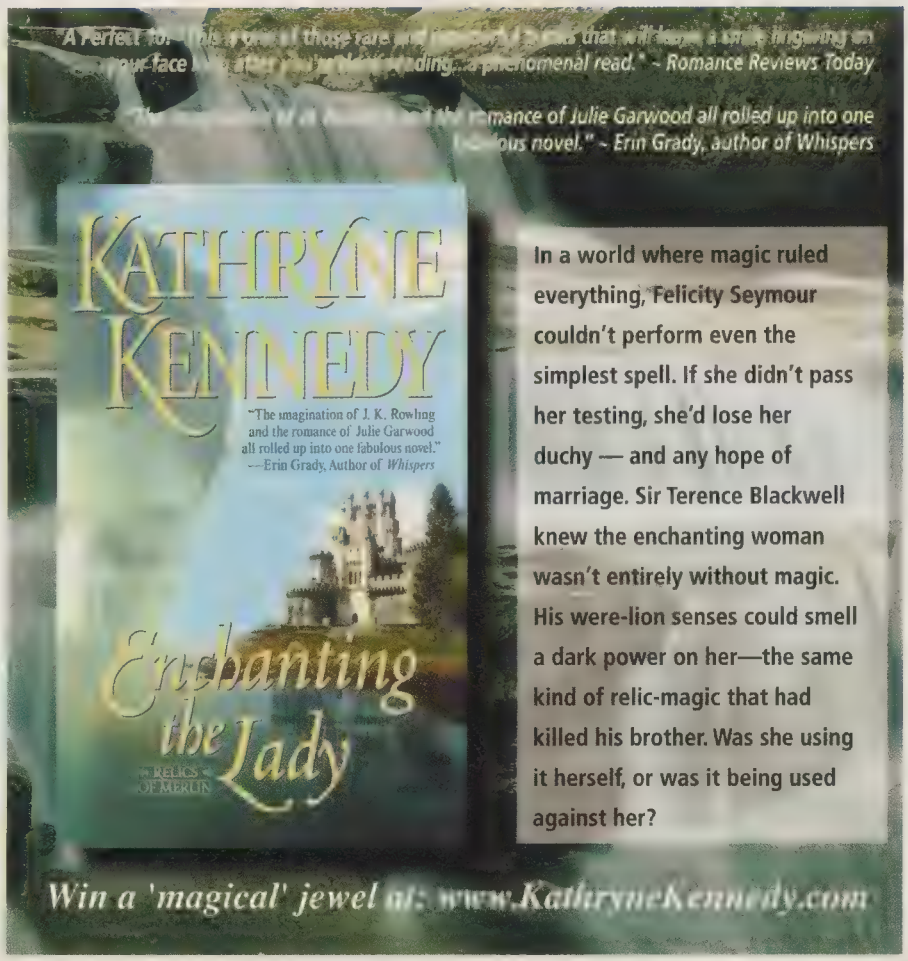
The Well of Ascension, Brandon Sanderson, Tor, New York, NY, 592 pp., hardcover, $27.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1688-2.

The first thing to be said about Brandon Sanderson's sequel to *Mistborn* is that the author has made things more complicated, not less so, setting up some new challenges. In *Mistborn,* the Lord Ruler, tyrant for a millennium, was overthrown, leaving the mother of all power vacuums. In *The Well of Ascension,* Sanderson asks the question, "now what?" and largely answers it with verve and rigor. Of course, the slayer of the Lord Ruler, Vin, must now rule the land—a far different proposition from overthrowing the tyrant. In addition to political intrigues and turmoil, Vin must deal with the threat of three approaching armies. Throughout the novel Sanderson does a good job of incorporating interesting aspects of the mist-magic into the otherwise realistic scenario, and of juggling the small-scale and large-scale scenes that must comprise an undertaking of this scope and magnitude. Some readers may find *The Well of Ascension* somewhat less exciting than its predecessor, but most will be mesmerized by Sanderson's balancing act.

Shadowbridge, Gregory Frost, Del Rey, New York, NY, 255 pp., trade paperback, $13.95, ISBN: 978-0-345-49758-1.

In addition to the return of heroic fantasy, stories-within-stories Scheherazade-style are back in vogue, which is good for Gregory

Amber Heat
Glimmer Fever
Stories in this Collection:
April's Aphrodisiac
ISBN: 978-1-60272-964-3 (print)
A curse, a dream, and a promise all lead brave men and women into the dangerous fantasy worlds of April's Aphrodisiac.
Sidhe Warrior
ISBN: 978-1-60272-063-3 (electronic)
Twenty-First Century woman meets First Century sidhe warrior and sparks fly.
Test of Truth
ISBN: 978-1-60272-081-7 (electronic)
Space pirates, deception, danger, and erotic love among the distant stars.
Desert Passion
ISBN: 1-59279-153-0 (electronic)
Dreams and danger in the arms of a masked desert lover.
For more information please visit: www.amberquill.com/amberheat
www.april-reid.com
amazon.com


"A perfect to... phenomenal read." ~ Romance Reviews Today
...mance of Julie Garwood all rolled up into one ...ous novel." ~ Erin Grady, author of Whispers
KATHRYNE KENNEDY
"The imagination of J. K. Rowling and the romance of Julie Garwood all rolled up into one fabulous novel." —Erin Grady, Author of Whispers
Enchanting the Lady
THE RELICS OF MERLIN
In a world where magic ruled everything, Felicity Seymour couldn't perform even the simplest spell. If she didn't pass her testing, she'd lose her duchy — and any hope of marriage. Sir Terence Blackwell knew the enchanting woman wasn't entirely without magic. His were-lion senses could smell a dark power on her—the same kind of relic-magic that had killed his brother. Was she using it herself, or was it being used against her?
Win a 'magical' jewel at: www.KathryneKennedy.com

NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

Midnight Alley, by Rachel Caine, NAL Jam Books, October 2007. Claire Danvers' gradual descent into the world of the vampires who utterly control the small Texas town of Morganville continues, as Amelie, the most powerful vampire in town, reveals her plans for Claire. Now Claire has to juggle friendships and loyalties, apprenticed to an insane vampire scholar and facing death from all directions. Worse still, an antivampire cabal is looking to use—or kill—her, believing that she holds the key to either saving or destroying the vampire race. The plot thickens, the mysteries deepen, and the danger becomes more intense as the series gets better with each book. Caine is definitely on a roll with the Morganville Vampires, and *Midnight Alley* is the best yet.

Uninvited by Justine Musk, MTV Books, September 2007. Ever since Kelly Ruland's brother vanished in the wake of a tragic car accident, she's been drifting through her life aimlessly, acting out against the old status quo and experimenting with drugs and alcohol, as if to fill a void. Then Jasper returns, followed by a strange motorcycle gang and a devilish being named Archie, who wants Jasper to return to the gang, and Kelly to surrender to his power. Little does Kelly realize that the answers to all her questions lie in a night she barely remembers, and that nothing is what it appears to be. *Uninvited* is a gripping, haunting tale of seduction, temptation, longing, and redemption, with some surprising twists to keep the story fresh and exciting.

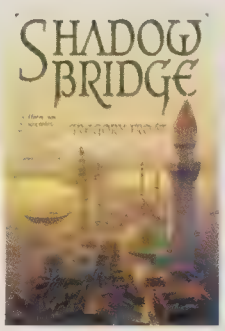
Book of a Thousand Days, by Shannon Hale, September 2007. When Dashti swore to serve the Lady Saren in all ways, she never expected that she and her new mistress would almost immediately be shut away in a tower for the next seven years, all because Saren refused to marry a powerful, evil warlord. And when the opportunity to free themselves arises, Dashti finds herself stretched to the limits, taking care of herself and Saren. What begins as an attempt to find shelter and safety soon becomes an epic struggle for survival, and what began as an innocent deception years ago turns into a heartbreaking romance that may not have a happily ever after. In this book, Hale takes inspiration from the central Asian steppes to totally reimagine the fairy tale "Maid Maleen" and succeeds admirably, weaving magic, mystery, and romance together in a memorable setting. Once again, Hale definitely satisfies.

Hero, by Perry Moore, Hyperion, August 2007. Thom Creed is not your average teenager. Blessed with amazing healing powers, trying to live down the legacy of his father, a disgraced superhero, he struggles with secrets of his own. When he goes against his father's wishes and joins the League, the world's foremost superhero team, as a probationary member, he quickly makes new friends and enemies. Soon, his entire world threatens to come crashing down, as old secrets are unearthed. What really happened when Thom's mother vanished? Why was his father disgraced? And what seed of corruption has taken hold at the heart of the world's greatest heroes? And what chance do a healer, a cranky pyrokinetic, an elderly precognitive, and a boy who can make anyone sick have at saving the world? *Hero* is a beautiful, elegant, compelling epic coming-of-age story, in which one young man comes to terms with his sexuality, his family history, and his own grand destiny. I couldn't put this one down. It may just be one of the best books I've read all year.

The Nixie's Song, by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, Simon & Schuster, September 2007. Nick Vargas doesn't know what to make of his new stepsister, Laurie. She's weird, annoying, and worst of all, believes in fairies. Not that he's cool by comparison, but still, he has his limits. However, when a copy of *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide* brings the two of them into contact with the world of fairies, Nick's forced to work with Laurie for survival. Now they're saving nixies, seeing pixies, and running from giants, and their only hope lies in finding the authors of the book ... or in getting help from Jared Grace, who knows all about the dangers fairies can pose. Will it be enough to deal with the giant rampaging through their Florida subdivision? This is the first in a new trilogy that returns to the world of the *Spiderwick Chronicles*, and Black and DiTerlizzi are in fine form, mixing a fast-paced, engaging story with whimsical, highly evocative artwork. Just as good as the first series, if not better.

Little (Grrl) Lost, by Charles de Lint, Viking, September 2007. T.J.'s still getting over her family moving from the countryside to the Newford suburbs, and she's not taking it well at all. Unexpectedly, she finds an unlikely friend and ally in Elizabeth, who's several years older, likewise at odds with her family, and only six inches tall. A Little trying to make it in the world of the Bigs, Elizabeth is prickly, sarcastic, and annoying, but the two manage to get along. That is, until they're separated in a moment of ill luck, while trying to find an author who can possibly help reunite Elizabeth with her family. Now T.J. is stuck fending for herself in some very dangerous parts of Newford, while Elizabeth undertakes a hazardous odyssey of her own. Told in alternating voices as the two girls try to survive and fulfill their individual goals, *Little (Grrl) Lost* is an entertaining, magic-filled tale about growing up (a little) and finding one's place in the world, as only de Lint can tell it.

Fight Game, by Kate Wild, Chicken House, July 2007. Gypsy boy Freedom Smith is built for fighting, courtesy of a family legacy stretching back to his ancestor, legendary bare-knuckle champion Hercules Smith. Unfortunately, his talents have brought him all sorts of unwanted attention, which is how he ends up recruited by a shadowy organization known as Phoenix to infiltrate an illegal underground fighting group called the Bear Pit. There, he has to struggle against his darker impulses, fight to stay alive, and get to the heart of a centuries-old evil that's somehow intertwined with his family history. Mind control, genetic manipulation, weird technology, free running, and hyperkinetic fight scenes all combine into something new and intriguingly different in this exciting offering, the first in a new series. I was instantly hooked, and am looking forward to the future adventures of Freedom Smith.



Frost and his *Shadowbridge*, because not only is his protagonist, Leodora, a story collector and teller, but everyone lives on a huge bridge that is for all intents and purposes the world, as there's nothing beneath but endless seas. To call the premise audacious would be an understatement, and yet it's the stories and the characters that reign here, not the concept, for all the glitter. Leodora, fleeing her past, is a very real person, and her adventures and perils are also real. The idea of the naming of things and people being important, the idea of stories being not frivolous but vital, drives the engine of the plot. A cavalcade of other characters, from Leodora's manager to her musical companion, also provide depth. The inclusion of gods and much of wonder in the setting is certainly a bonus, but almost isn't necessary. The only real shame about *Shadowbridge*, however, is that it's clearly part one of a novel cut into two parts (for marketing reasons?), with the second half to be published in 2008.

In the Cities of Coin and Spice, Catherynne M. Valente, Bantam Spectra, New York, NY, 528 pp., trade paperback, $14.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-38404-8.

In the story department, Catherynne M. Valente might just have Frost beat, as the second volume of her *Orphan's Tales* (the first volume won the Tiptree Award) contains stories on top of stories, within stories, sprouting out of other stories, all of it told in a rich, often ornate style that can be dizzying to the uninitiated. While the book does have a kind of frame, the most pleasure comes from individual tales, my favorites involving hedgehog warriors and sparrow calligraphers. Some turns of phrase, as in "The Tale of the Tongue," bear repeating: "The tongue of a Basilisk is a valuable thing—the thin veneer of skin, thinner than a manuscript page, hides a muscle all of fire." In the best of her tales, Valente manages to reinvent the source material while retaining some of the original context and energy. The intensity of detail Valente displays, complemented by Michael Kaluta's interesting illustrations, will provide hours of entertainment for connoisseurs of folktales.

Chronicles of the Black Company, Glen Cook, Tor, New York, NY, 704 pp., trade paperback, $15.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1923-4.

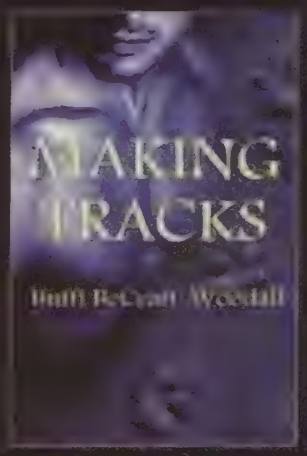
Nothing gave me greater pleasure than reading Glen Cook's *Dread Empire* and *Black Company* novels in my formative years as a writer. The *Dread Empire* novels took heroic fantasy seriously, while being subtle and different. The *Black Company* novels that came later, though, managed to seem contemporary. As Steven Erikson has said, the *Black Company* novels are almost like tales of Vietnam set in a fantasyland. Tough, hard-bitten, and more complex than many reviewers gave them credit for, the *Black Company* chronicles showed that fantasy could be relevant and meaningful and, yes, deep. Even now, years later, without any difficulty at all, I can conjure up characters like Croaker, Walleye, One-Eye, and the Captain because Cook did such a great job of making them memorable. Now, Tor has rereleased the first three *Black Company* novels in one handsome omnibus edition, assuring that a new generation of readers will be able to read these dark, often harrowing adventures. All of your favorite heroic fantasy writers were influenced by this series, I guarantee it.

Jeff VanderMeer

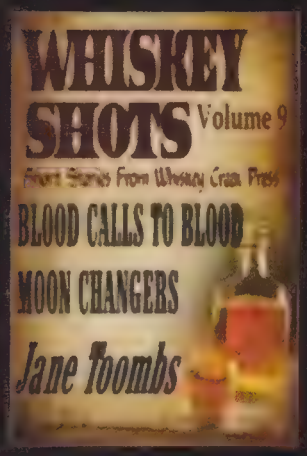
Unlikely searchers:
Twylgalit...sent by the trees to find a champion
Rafi...a young gryphon allergic to magic
Jody Burns...wants to get back to shopping at the mall
What can you do when not even the trees listen?
"Great characters, a fascinating world, a scary villain, griffins and talking trees, what more can a reader ask for in a good Fantasy novel!"
– Carrie Masek, author of A DRAGON'S TAIL
"...This story is pure fantasy. What more could you ask for? Great fun!" – Lesley, Eternal Night
Talking To Trees
Kathryn Sullivan
ISBN: 1-59279-468-8 (Electronic) / ISBN: 1-59279-760-1 (Paperback)
A Trio Of Great Works By Kathryn Sullivan
www.amberquill.com
Available through Amber Quill Press, Amazon.com, Fictionwise.com - Fantasy/Young Adult Fantasy
Agents & Adepts
Kathryn Sullivan
Agents And Adepts
ISBN: 1-59279-122-0 (Electronic)
ISBN: 1-59279-917-5 (Paperback)
Winner of the 2003 Dream Realm Award for Best Anthology
The Crystal Throne
ISBN: 1-59279-085-2 (Electronic)
ISBN: 1-59279-942-6 (Paperback)
Winner of the 2002 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy

Come...Escape with us to

The Witch Stone
Author: Brenda Williamson
www.BrendaWilliamson.com



Blue Collar Werewolf: Making Tracks
Author: Buffi BeCraft-Woodall
www.buffibecraftwoodallauthor.com

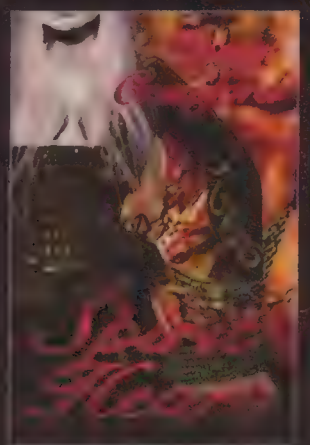


Whiskey Shots: Blood Calls To Blood & Moon Changers
Author: Jane Toombs
www.janetoombs.com

Song of a Druid Princess
Author: Jean Hart Stewart
www.jeanhartstewart.com

To Summon a Demon
Author: Kim Knox
www.kim-knox.co.uk

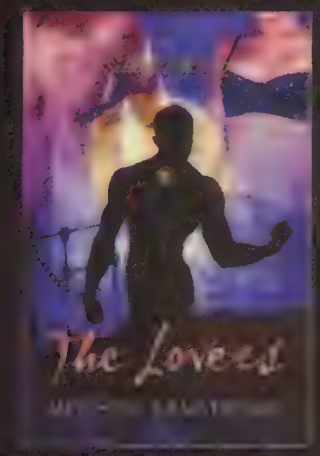
Tiger's Tail
Author: Liz Craven
www.lizcraven.com



Spirit Heart
Author: Louise Crawford
www.lfcrawford.com

Night of the Blue Moon
Author: Lynn Crain
www.lynncrain.com

infinite worlds of Fantasy.



Settler's Mine 2: The Lovers
Author: Mechele Armstrong
www.mechelearmstrong.com

The Key
Author: Pauline B. Jones
www.perilouspauline.com

'Tween Heaven And Hell
Author: Sam Cheever
www.samcheever.com

Boji Stones
Author: Sandra Cox
www.sandracox1.com

Secrets & Spies
Author: Shara Lanel
www.sharalanel.com

Infiltration
Author: Sherrill Quinn
www.sherrillquinn.com

Night Shadow
Author: Shirley Martin
www.shirleymartin.net

Healing Wounds
Author: Vanessa N. Gilfoy
www.vanessagilfoy.com

By Janni Lee Simner

Iceland's folklore is strongly connected to its landscape—and its fog.

Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft

I step out of my rental car, into a land of gray stone, dry moss, and ceaseless wind. The wind blows more often than not in Iceland, and when it does, it always feels ceaseless. I'm in the Strandir region of Iceland's West Fjords, an area long associated with sorcery and uncanny happenings, and I've pulled over to read an interpretive sign. *Selkolla's Stone,* the English-language section of the sign reads, and it goes on to recount a bit of Icelandic folklore.

Eight centuries ago, the story goes, a laborer and a maid were charged with the task of bringing a newborn child to the nearest priest for christening. During their journey, they grew distracted by their mutual attraction for one another, so they laid the babe down on one side of a large boulder and made love on other side. Once their lust was satisfied, they tried to fetch the infant back again, only to find that the child had an evil look about it and showed no signs of life. The couple fled the scene; searchers later returned to look for the infant, but it was gone.

It turned out an evil spirit had entered the child. Soon after that spirit, grown to a monster with a seal-shaped head (Selkolla literally means "Seal's Head") began stealing sheep and terrorizing the region. The monster's attacks continued unchecked until the bishop Gudmundur the Good fought Selkolla off with prayers and charms, forcing her to sink down into the earth.

I look up from the sign, across a rocky slope. I see a large boulder, its edges standing out in stark relief against gray slope and gray sky. Selkolla's Stone, still standing 800 years later.

All photos by Janni Lea Simner unless credited otherwise

ABOVE: In Njal's Saga, *violent conflicts and meetings take place at Thingvellir.*
RIGHT: Kaldbaksborn, the sorcer's mountain, is nearly hidden by magical fog.
TOP: A page from a grimoire, a book of spells.

I shiver, not because of the wind. *It happened here,* I think. *In this very spot.* The veil between past and present—between story and history—seems suddenly thin.

Perhaps I've read this story before; if I did, it left little impression. Back home, five thousand miles away from Iceland and Strandir, I have a couple of books filled with Icelandic folktales. Without realizing it, I'd always mentally set those folktales—perhaps all folktales—in a sort of generic long ago and far away. Yet now I'm reading something that feels very different: a story about the uneven ground on which I stand. *This stone,* I think. *This slope. This mountain pass.*

I'm a fantasy writer. I know well enough that every story has a setting. This shouldn't surprise me.

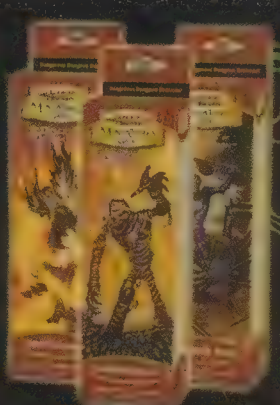
It does surprise me.

Yet I was drawn to Iceland in part because another portion of the country's literature—its family sagas—are so strongly bound to their places. I somehow missed the sagas in my high school and college literature classes, and instead discovered them just five years ago, during my first trip to Iceland, when I

A MINIATURE EVOLUTION.

Inspired by the classic *AD&D*™ adventure, the new **D&D**® **Miniatures** *Desert of Desolation*™ set features themed monsters such as the Scarab Swarm and Mummy, while also giving you a first crack at *4th Edition* creatures such as the new Troll and the Cyclops. And as if that weren't enough, *Desert of Desolation* introduces new rules such as "mount" and the long-awaited Gelatinous Cube.

Evolve your game. Get some *Desert of Desolation* boosters today.



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS MINIATURES GAME

DESERT OF DESOLATION™

GET TOGETHER. ROLL SOME DICE. HAVE FUN.

DNDINSIDER.COM

All trademarks are property of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. ©2007 Wizards.

ABOVE: An evil spirit entered a neglected infant's head at Selkolla's Stone, still standing after 800 years. RIGHT: The blocky stone walls of Thingvellir give off a powerful aura.

spent the long evenings—so far north, the summer sun doesn't set until around midnight—reading a battered old translation of *Njal's Saga*. I was maybe halfway through the saga when I visited Thingvellir, the original site of Iceland's thousand-year-old Althing, or parliament.

Thingvellir is located in a rift valley, where the North American and European tectonic plates meet, and where they are pulling a couple of centimeters farther apart every year—a breathtaking pace, by geological standards. As I walked through the valley, I knew I walked through a place of power. Cracks riddled the mossy gray earth, and blocky stone walls stood facing one another. Looking at those walls, I could almost see how they must have fit together once, before the earth forced them apart. When I closed my eyes, I could almost feel the earth continuing to move beneath my feet.

In *Njal's Saga*, Thingvellir is the site of violent conflicts and fateful meetings. When I opened my eyes again, I could almost see those conflicts playing out before me. It took no effort at all to believe this was the ground where opposing parties battled over the burning of the farmer Njal in his home; or that here Hallgerdur Longlegs, whose beautiful hair was long enough to wrap around her like a veil, asked Njal's friend Gunnar to tell her about his travels, setting in motion events that would help lead to the burning.

At Thingvellir, I felt as if the past breathed over my shoulder. I felt as if the saga characters I'd read about were more real than the bored-looking tourists around me. When I heard one of those characters talking to me, I didn't laugh, as I might have back home; I stopped and wrote down her words.

I know that one has to be careful about taking the sagas too literally. They're a strange mix of history and fiction, born out of real events that took place around a thousand years ago, yet not written down until a couple hundred years after that. No one knows how much the stories were changed by centuries of oral tradition; no one knows what liberties were taken by the anonymous writers who eventually committed those stories to parchment, and to the form we know them in today.

Yet during my visit to Thingvellir I believed down to my bones that if the events I'd read about hadn't happened, events like them had.

Later, back home, I'd have time for questioning and doubting. Just then, I knew only that this torn and rifted land was a place where unsettled events had to have occurred, that its geological and historical tensions were intimately entwined. Move the events that had happened here elsewhere, and those events would change, in small ways or in large ones.

This is as true for any contemporary fantasy novel as it is for a thousand-year-old saga: when you change the setting, you change the story. I knew that. Yet walking through Thingvellir five years ago—and standing beside Selkolla's Stone last summer—I learned it again. Long ago is not the same as far away. Of course the sagas and folktales, both of which have their basis in things that happened once, are strongly bound to their places.

If there isn't a boulder, no baby can be left unguarded beside it. Stories happen where they happen for a reason. In Iceland I discovered that this is as true for a folktale rendered with a few sure strokes as for any multivolume fantasy series.

The Icelandic sagas have something of the feel of modern high fantasy to them, even though ultimately their concerns are very different. (For one thing, there has never been a high king of Iceland, nor a king of any other sort, either. For another, high fantasy doesn't share the sagas' fascination with the law; if there were a dark lord in a saga, he'd be as likely to be defeated by a lawsuit as by weapons or magic.) This feel may come from the fact that Tolkien drew upon the sagas and eddas when creating Middle-Earth, and from the fact that writers have been drawing on Tolkien ever since. Whatever the reason, when I began reading *Njal's Saga*, I felt a little like I was on familiar ground, even before I visited Thingvellir.

Maybe that was why I kept reading the sagas after I returned home. I moved from the story of burnt Njal to other tales—tales about outlaws and poets, shapeshifters and ghosts, prophecies and feuds. (There are always feuds, just as there are always lawsuits.) Like some fantasy novels, I found that the sagas made more sense if I read them with a map close at hand. Unlike the maps in fantasy novels, though, the saga map was real. It came with a latitude and a longitude; I could find it on a globe, a tiny island in the north Atlantic, huddled beneath Greenland's shadow.

So when I returned to Iceland last summer, I brought a map and a list of saga sites with me. I wanted to travel the landscape of this not-quite-fantasy world. I wanted to feel the past breathing over my shoulder again.

I started not in Strandir, but in South Iceland, where much of *Njal's Saga* takes place. Larus Bragason, my guide to the region, directed me along brown dirt roads and gravelly black volcanic ones, past braided rivers and green fields and barren plains. As Larus linked this land to the events that had occurred there, I slowly formed a visual and tactile map of the saga.

I stood in a gravelly field where only brown grasses grew, stared at a sharp green slope in the distance, and thought: *Here the place where outlawed Gunnar rode away from home, knowing he could never return. Here the place where Gunnar fell from his horse, looked back, and declared home and hillside too lovely to leave.*

I stood where the river called the Markarfljot once ran, and thought: *Here the place where Njal's son Skarphedin slid on the ice, his axe cutting off the head of Gunnar's kinsman Thrain as it did.*

I stood on a green hillside and thought: *Here the home Gunnar returned to, though he knew it meant his death. Here the place where Gunnar asked his wife Hallgerdur for two locks of her hair, to repair his broken bowstring in battle. Here the place where Hallgerour thought of the slap Gunnar gave her once, and refused his request.*

I stood in a quiet grassy field filled with dandelions, looking toward the sea, and thought: *Here the place where Njal and his wife and all their sons were burned to death in their home. Here the place where Njal's son-in-law Kari escaped the fire, his hair and clothes aflame.*

He came like the wind,
like the wind touched everything, and like the wind was gone.

In Memoriam

JAMES OLIVER RIGNEY JR.—ROBERT JORDAN—
AUTHOR, FRIEND
1948–2007

Few in his generation have touched the lives of so many.
Far fewer still will go on touching lives for generations yet to come.

The Wheel of Time turns and ages come and pass,
leaving memories that become legend.

Fare you well Jim, from all of us at Tor.

PHOTO: JACK ALTERMAN

ABOVE: Casting spells gave the farmers hope that they would survive Iceland's harsh landscape. RIGHT TOP: Njal and his family were burned to death on the site of this grassy field. RIGHT BOTTOM: Gudmundur once blessed the waters of this pool.

If *Njal's Saga* had seemed familiar ground five years ago, it seemed something more now. Bits and pieces of the saga suddenly made more sense, or else resonated more deeply, simply because I stood on the same ground as their characters. I thought of how close together those feuding farmers lived, within sight of one another; I understood why, given that closeness, they couldn't keep from feuding. I thought of Gunnar's hillside, and wondered whether, like me, those near to him wondered whether that hillside was worth dying for. I wondered whether things would have turned out differently if Gunnar had fallen from his horse an hour later and seen a different view. Outlawed characters did escape their fates sometimes, in other sagas set in other places. A few hundred meters, a subtly different landscape, and Gunnar's story might have changed utterly.

I thought, too, of something I saw in the distance as I stood at the site of Njál's death: the newborn island of Surtsey, which rose out of the Atlantic in an impressive display of volcanic fire and smoke just fifty years ago. Njál couldn't have seen Surtsey, any more than I could have seen the Markarfljot as it flowed a thousand years ago, before its course changed.

I realized that just as stories change through generations of telling and retelling, the land

THE DOWN HOME ZOMBIE BLUES

HE'S A FLORIDA COP. SHE'S AN INTERGALACTIC ZOMBIE HUNTER. SAVING THIS PLANET IS THE LEAST OF THEIR PROBLEMS...

It's *Men In Black* meets *CSI:Miami* when a sexy space commander and an irresistibly earthy Florida police detective pair up on a deadly mission to save Earth. . . but for this mismatched pair of crime fighters, the most dangerous thing could be their own cosmic attraction.

"Sinclair's strong characterizations and methodical plotting make the book an unexpected treat...fans of romance and fantasy hunting for edgier fare can stop singing the blues." ~Publishers Weekly

"A rip-roaring, genre-bending, edge-of-your-seat read that has it all!" ~Susan Grant, New York Times bestselling author

Wherever paperbacks are sold

www.bantamdell.com
www.linneasinclair.com

Listen to the official soundtrack at www.soundclick.com/zombielightorchestra

they're born out of changes too. I began to think that maybe stories inform their settings, as much as settings inform their stories.

The farm where Njal died was peaceful and still. Yet even so, I cannot think of those dandelions now without also thinking of the flames that burned there, a thousand years ago.

The events of *Njal's Saga* are concentrated in the south, but also span the rest of Iceland. Just a few scenes are set in Strandir, and one of them took place in the same pass where I found Selkolla's stone. The saga says that Hallgerdur's uncle, the sorcerer Svanur, used his magic to fill that pass with fog, hiding the man who had killed Hallgerdur's first husband (Gunnar was her third), and forcing the man's enemies to turn back and abandon their pursuit.

Strandir is also home to the Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft. The practice of sorcery in Iceland continued well past Svanur's time, at least into the early 20th century, and the sorcery museum documents that practice. At the museum, I looked at scraps of bone and skin, wood and stone, carved and inked with sorcerous runes. Those scraps made the magic they represented feel real; I could easily imagine them lying scattered around some sorcerer's home, in the same way that fragments of paper with phone numbers and grocery lists lie scattered about mine. I read instructions for spells that went with those runes, rescued from old grimoires. Some of the spells were for big things, like calling up storms and raising the dead, but others dealt with smaller, more domestic matters, like making sheep behave, or keeping foxes away from livestock. Again, the small details that made things feel real, just like in any well-written story.

The museum's spells didn't come from saga heroes or villains, though. In most cases, the names of the spellcasters weren't even known, just as the names of the man and woman who left a baby unguarded beside Selkolla's Stone weren't known. Outside of the sagas, Iceland didn't start taking a census of its ordinary citizens until 1703.

As I left the museum, Bjork Bjarnadottir, an environmental enthnologist working there, said that I should also be sure to visit the Sorcerer's Cottage, a museum annex that reconstructs what the home of an ordinary sorcerer—or any ordinary 17th-century tenant farmer—might have looked like. As it turned out, the Sorcerer's Cottage stood within sight of Svanur's home, Svansholl. Svansholl was still a working farm, though the turf farmhouse that must have stood there once had been replaced by a modern red-roofed building.

The Sorcerer's Cottage was considerably smaller than that building; it was smaller, too, than the reconstructions of wealthy saga-era landowners' farmhouses I'd visited in the south. Unlike those farmhouses, the cottage's turf walls looked ready to melt into the rugged green hills around them. The manager of the sorcery museum, Sigurdur Atlason, told me the family that lived in such a cottage wouldn't have owned much: perhaps a single cow, a horse, five or six sheep. Even so, that family would have been doing better than others.

"Life was hard here," Sigurdur explained quietly, as he looked to the green and brown grasses around us, land where those sheep might graze and where that family might struggle to survive. Sorcery was all about that struggle, Sigurdur said, because if you could cast a spell, "It gave you hope. Hope that maybe tomorrow would be better." He opened the cottage's uneven wooden door and led the way through its small rooms. I smelled mold, wet wood, drying fish. The dirt walls felt scratchy against my palms; stray bits of straw from those walls fell to the floor and got into my hair.

Everywhere in the cottage there were magical runes, carved on the building's weathered beams and written on strips of parchment tucked into cracks in the walls. Runes for protection, for stopping thieves, for healthy livestock, for safe fishing. Everyday magic, shaped by the land around it—or by the living its practitioners tried to draw from that land. The challenges of doing so grew greater in the centuries following the saga era, I knew, first as Iceland's climate turned colder and harsher, then as disease and volcanic

Wholesale Color-Me Posters
Tom Halverson is a full time fantasy portrait artist, turning youths of all ages into fairies, mermaids, etc. See his amazing work at www.tomhalverson.com!
The Fantasy Art of Tom Halverson
(218) 224-3615
www.tomhalverson.com
email: sketches@paulbunyan.net

ABOVE: Iceland's midnight sun is barely visible in the strange, unnatural fog. BELOW LEFT: The Sorcerer's Cottage blends into the landscape. BELOW RIGHT: Magical runes are carved into the beams and tucked into the nooks and crannies of the Sorcerer's Cottage.

Below left/right: Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft

eruptions took their toll on the island's population. If someone cast a spell to protect their livestock or farm, there was a good chance they did so because they feared that farm might fail.

From one corner of the cottage Sigurdur picked up a goatskin and a staff. He draped the goat skin over his head, held the staff in one hand, and chanted words in deep, resonant Icelandic—the same words Svanur spoke, in *Njal's Saga,* to call up his fog. Outside the cottage, Sigurour pointed to a spot in a nearby hill and told me that Svanur used to step into the earth there, taking a shortcut through the hills to visit his fishing camp near the mountain Kaldbakshorn. I knew about Kaldbakshorn; in *Njal's Saga,* Svanur entered that mountain when he died, and was received there with great joy. At the sorcery museum I'd asked Björk what she thought it meant, to be received into a mountain. "It means he gave himself over to the powers," she'd said.

Kaldbakshorn was marked on my map. I had plans to visit it later.

Sorcery wasn't the only magic to be found in Strandir, though. Sigurour also led me through the hills outside the Sorcerer's Cottage, mapping some of their other folklore. He pointed to a low hill covered with sunken rocks—the sort of place the huldufólk, or hidden folk, might live, he said. A single standing stone nearby—that was more likely to house a single troll. The side of another hill—the dwarves just might put a door into their realm there, or else in some similar place.

As I followed Sigurdur along the banks of a trickling stream, he admitted that not all Icelanders believe magical creatures lie hidden in the land around them; some people see such stories as tales for children, meant to make them behave. If a child throws rocks, after all, or climbs on unstable ground, telling him or her to stop "because the hidden folk live there" might get a quicker response than "because I said so." But, Sigurdur added thoughtfully, there were also many stories about people being helped out by the hidden folk. "I think it is safer to believe," he said.

Before we parted ways, I asked Sigurdur if he thought people—contemporary people—were still shaped by the land they live in. "I think they would have to be," he replied. "A person raised in a cave is different from a person raised in a greenhouse."

For just a moment, my thoughts turned from Strandir to my own home in the Arizona desert, a land as stark as Iceland's treeless hills and yet utterly different from them. I thought of Arizona's jagged Catalina Mountains, visible from my back door, which I'd come to think of as my mountains. My land, though I didn't grow up there.

In the desert I first came to understand why Native American tribes consider certain mountains sacred. I came to understand, too, that you couldn't just trade one sacred mountain for another; the mountains one person grew beneath were different from the mountains another person grew beneath. Each mountain shaped its own people—and its own folklore—in different, subtle ways.

The trickster Coyote could not live in Strandir, I realized, any more than a troll could live in the Catalina Mountains. Or maybe they could live there, only they would have to adapt to their surroundings.

The next morning, when I stopped by the sorcery museum again, I asked Sigurour and Björk about the difference between the elves and the hidden folk; they told me that in Iceland, it's mostly the hidden folk that people talk about. Elves, they said, seemed more a part of traditional Norse mythology than of Icelandic folklore.

Then again, Bjork added, many things from traditional Norse lore seemed to change upon arrival in Iceland. Instead of elves, people began talking about the hidden folk. Instead of giants, they began talking about trolls.

I wondered what *would* happen to Coyote, if he were translated to Iceland. I wondered what would happen to me.

Before returning to the sorcery museum, though, I spent a night near the Sorcerer's Cottage, at the Hotel Laugarholl. As I ate dinner, I watched fog move toward the hotel from the coast. It was a strange fog, an unnatural fog, low and gray and suspended beneath a bright blue sky. That fog seemed to reach toward me, draw away, reach toward me again. I could easily believe a sorcerer was chanting, somewhere in these hills.

The wind had died, and the stillness felt like a sort of magic, too. After dinner, Iceland's midnight sun still hours from setting, I set off

FURTHER READING

Njal's Saga, translated by Robert Cook (Penguin, 2002).

Icelandic Folk and Fairy Tales, translated by Mary and Hallberg Hallmundsson (Iceland Review, 1987, 2000).

Icelandic Legends, collected by John Arnason, translated by George P.J. Powell and Eiríkr Magnússon (Routledge Publishing, 2006, reproduction of an 1864 edition).

The Sagas of the Icelanders, [this is a comprehensive, with no compiler or translator credited] (Penguin, 2000).

ONLINE

The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft: www.galdrasyning.is

to find Kaldbakshorn, Svanur's mountain. In other words, I headed into the fog.

That fog thickened as I drove, and it grew more uncanny as well. It muted the near ground, turned the more distant hills to shapes without color or texture. It seemed to coat the land, turning everything soft and silver-gray, caressing the rocks as it rolled over them.

Just then, I had no doubt that this was the magical fog of sagas, of folklore, of fantasy novels. The sort of fog that lures people away from their homes, leading them to enchanted lands from which they don't return. I felt like I was driving into those enchanted lands myself. Like I was driving into a story.

I opened the car window and stuck out my hand. The magical fog felt surprisingly real, cold and sharp as ice against my arm.

Reading folktales and sagas five thousand miles from their settings—their homes—it is easy to be skeptical. It is easy to say that fog can happen for many reasons, and that a dead sorcerer's spell is not the most likely of them.

But I wasn't five thousand miles away, and so instead I accepted that the sorcerer didn't want me to find his mountain. When the fog drew so close that I couldn't see the dirt road beneath my tires, I turned back. It was safer to believe.

As soon as I did turn back, the spell was broken, and the fog quickly cleared.

That night I swam in geothermally heated waters once blessed by Gudmundur the Good, the same bishop who forced Selkolla into the ground. The water, said to have healing properties, felt like liquid light, silky against my skin. Maybe the bishop's blessing made the water feel that way; maybe the feel of the water made people say it had a bishop's blessing. Maybe in the end we can't say which comes first, the story or the land.

All we can say is that it happened here. *This rock. This fog. This blessed spring.*

The next morning, I made another attempt on Svanur's mountain. The fog wasn't as thick this time; I could see the gray sands of the coast as I drove. The road wound past Bjarnarfjordur, or Bear's fjord (named for Svanur's father Bjorn, who first settled this valley). Abruptly I rounded a bend, and there outside the car window stood a rock-tumbled slope, wheeling with gray gulls.

I could only see the mountain's lower slopes, but even so, I didn't need my map to know that this was Kaldbakshorn, the mountain Svanur entered when he died. With the fog, with the birds, it was exactly the sort of place that would receive a sorcerer.

That the mountain was near Svanur's old fishing camp, that it only made sense for there to be birds near fish—those were thoughts for later. In that time, in that place, I simply thanked the old sorcerer for giving me a glimpse of his mountain, and then I turned back and drove on, out of the West Fjords, toward other saga sites and other stories.

In that time, in that place, I knew it couldn't have happened any other way. ❧

"NEW DORCHESTER IMPRINT SHOMI IS ONE WORTH WATCHING."
—*Publishers Weekly*

Coming in January
When novice Time Rogue Maude Kincaid finds herself mortally wounded in 2153, only a trip into America's past—

with a man who'd stolen her heart but couldn't follow her into the future—can save her.

Coming in February
After shooting through a time portal, Abbey Shore finds herself one hundred years in the future, in a

dying land filled with roving bands of humans fighting for survival, and the "ticks" against whom they fight.

Coming in March
Desperate to prove her worth in her family's dynastic company, Talia Fortune travels to a faraway colony

and finds herself joining the Robin Hood-like rebels outside of civilization.

SHOMI

Visit www.shomifiction.com to read excerpts, author interviews and to buy your favorite books.

The road to totalitarian despotism and to running dog capitalism is paved with nothing but the best of intentions. The fact that the road runs in a circle is not to be mentioned.

The People's Republic of the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course

BY M.K. HOBSON ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID LEONARD

Jeremy Schutz, manager of the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course, had a far more highly developed sense of responsibility than the average minimum wage employee. Because of this, the fact that that he'd forgotten—or to be brutally honest, neglected—to empty the course's trashcans the night before filled him with such guilt that the simple act of parking his Ford Festiva in the Employee of the Month spot (being the only employee, his literal right to it was ongoing) filled him with the kind of damp, soggy remorse one typically gets from mooning a busload of nuns.

To be fair, he'd had his reasons for his dereliction of duty, and they were good reasons, for they centered around Becky. Anything that centered around Becky was good—at least in Becky's opinion—and having dated her for over four years, Jeremy found that keeping his opinions perfectly synchronized with hers was not only gallant, but imperative. And so, when he'd found himself running late for a date with her at the Red Dog Anti-Imperialist Coffee Collective, he knew that he could let nothing—not even his matchless sense of responsibility—stand in his way. But despite his best efforts, he'd been late. And Becky had let him have it.

"Unpunctuality is the passive-aggressive acting out of an oppressive capitalist mentality." Becky had merged Marxism and feminism into an entirely new dialectic that she called Marxifism. "What have you got against the People, Jeremy?"

Jeremy mumbled that he didn't think he had anything against the People, but if Becky said that he did, it certainly did give him something to think about.

Sighing at the memory, he stepped out of his Ford Festiva and unlocked the back door of the Snack Shack and hurried into the cool, musty-smelling darkness. It was 9 AM, and the course didn't open until 10, so there was plenty of time to attend to unfinished business before Mrs. Mielcarz could be expected to arrive with her putter in its case of crimson silk.

Jeremy was overjoyed one day when the princess and her retinue came out in sedan chairs, draped with cobalt silks, flying pennants of red samite, to bathe and frolic.

The Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course contained nine holes, par 2 each hole, one tricky dogleg on the third, and a mean borrow on the seventh. But, of course, no one came to improve their golf skills. They came for the crazy fun of the brightly colored little buildings. The course was a medieval German village in miniature, complete with thatched roofs, half-beam construction, windmills, bridges, fake little sheep, and painted children in lederhosen and suspenders. Just the kind of village you'd want to hit a little white ball through. The centerpiece was the castle, a big blue-and-white fantasy knockoff of the Cinderella castle in Disneyland, all turrets and spires and romance.

Jeremy ran everything. He sold tickets, adjusted the mechanisms, freed balls when they got trapped, rented out the clubs and balls, and emptied (or was supposed to, he thought with a twinge of guilt) the trash every night. As the golf course wasn't really very heavily trafficked, even on weekends, it left him with a lot of spare time on his hands. His job was easier than slinging burgers, or selling encyclopedias door-to-door, and for that, he was grateful.

Inside the Snack Shack, Jeremy flipped on the lights and opened the register. He tied on his apron, which read "Edelweiss Village—You'll Have a Ball!" He placed hot dogs on the tines of the rotating hot-dog machine and put fresh buns in the bun warmer. He dumped two equal sloshes of oil and corn into the popcorn machine. He went into the closet, opened the breaker panel, and switched on the music (a constantly looping soundtrack of cheerful polka music piped through speakers hidden under rocks) and the fountains (the course had three) and the attractions (the windmill on hole 2, the ball elevator on hole 4, the maddening, oppositionally-sliding tiles on hole 8, and the rising and lowering drawbridge of Ludwig's castle.) Then Jeremy slunk out to attend to the trash.

The round, cedar-ribbed trash receptacles were set in discreet locations around the course. There hadn't been all that many customers the day before so it wasn't like the trash cans had been overflowing when he'd left. Just a snowflake-smattering of mustard-stained hotdog wrappers, a Diet Dr. Pepper can or two. Nonetheless, he dutifully removed each liner bag, stuffing it into a larger meta-bag, then relined each can with fresh plastic.

When he got to the last trash can, he found that its plastic liner was gone. The rusty bottom of the can's metal interior stared up at him. He drew his brows together.

Then, something caught his eye. A clear trash bag, caught fluttering on the closed drawbridge of the castle. It was empty, but streaks of ketchup and clinging popcorn showed it had contained trash. What could have done it? The wind? A large raccoon, perhaps? Vandals?

He hung his head as he stepped over to the castle. One night, one night he'd failed his duty, and look what had come of it. Becky would be so disappointed.

Then he noticed that there were little wisps of smoke curling up from the castle's small chimneys. Jeremy's heart leapt. Fire. The motor that turned the gear that lifted and lowered the drawbridge must have burned out and was still smoking. It made sense, as the drawbridge was not opening and closing as it was supposed to have. It was shut tight.

He hurried around to the back of the castle to pull the plug. He was startled to find that the castle wasn't even plugged in. He squinted his eyes and peered inside through the sheets of colored acetate that were meant to represent stained glass.

He was surprised to see movement inside. Brightly colored movement. Amazingly, there was a little fire burning in the carefully detailed plaster hearth. Even more amazingly, said fire had apparently been laid and lit by one of the dozens of tiny people milling about within the castle's great hall.

Jeremy gaped through the jewel-toned plastic. There was a king on the throne. A knight in shining armor was leading the banqueting tables in a rolicksome carouse. Jeremy noticed that on the little tables were neatly segmented pieces of hotdog that appeared to have been scavenged from yesterday's untaken out trash. There were also fluffy little white loaves that looked to be bits of hot-dog bun. The smiling little king had smears of ketchup around his mouth.

Seated nearby the king was a beautiful little woman. She wore sky blue threaded with silver, and her hair was the color of sunset on seafoam. She wore one of those princess hats that looked like an overturned ice cream cone. Jeremy watched her as she lifted a tiny silver goblet in honor of a tumbling jester.

Jeremy thought about saying something, about revealing his presence to the revelers within the castle, but just as he was about to do so, someone called him from beyond the chain link fence in a creaking, querulous voice. Jeremy looked up quickly. It was Mrs. Mielcarz.

He glanced at his watch. Was it ten already? He hurried back toward the entrance. If he didn't open on time, Mrs. Mielcarz would complain to Becky. And then there would be an inquest. Jeremy didn't like Becky's inquests, which typically featured lots of shouting and the enforced maintenance of the jetliner position. He went to let Mrs. Mielcarz in.

"You're two minutes late," Mrs. Mielcarz said, as she came into the Snack Shack. She wore a polyester pantsuit and she smelled like Old Golds and Preparation H. She looked at the trash bags, which Jeremy had forgotten he was holding. She made a face. "What's that? Aren't you s'posed to take the trash out at night?"

Guiltily, Jeremy dropped the bags behind the counter and reached for Mrs. Mielcarz's Frequent Putter card. He punched it.

"The castle's not working," he said, trying to avert any more awkward questions about the trash. Mrs. Mielcarz paused as she was withdrawing her beloved putter from its crimson silk case. She gave Jeremy the kind of look a younger woman might give to a lover who'd just admitted a string of infidelities.

"What do you mean, not working?" She said, her voice an accusatory whisper. She particularly liked the castle.

"I guess the mechanism's froze up," Jeremy said, running his tongue along the inside of his lip. "I'll work on it. Meanwhile I guess

you'll just have to putt around."

The expression on Mrs. Mielcarz's face became even more sour.

"Well, if I must ... I must." The tone of her voice made it clear that she didn't accept her own logic.

"I'll work on it today," Jeremy offered. "But ... well, you know. These things take time." Then he hurried to take the trash out to the dumpster, leaving Mrs. Mielcarz to what was sure to be a sadly substandard putt-putt golf experience.

That night, Jeremy made sure he got around to taking the trash out early, once it was clear he'd have no more customers before closing. He wanted to make sure that he left no trash out overnight, especially not food. One night of leaving food out, and he'd attracted a royal court. Who knew what another night might bring. Peasants? Serfs? Burghers? He didn't want to take any chances.

But as he was relining the garbage cans, his eyes were inexorably drawn to the castle. Small brightly colored flags flapped at the top of little poles no bigger than chopsticks. It was a very pretty castle. In the light of the setting sun, its white walls were a lovely coral color.

He wondered what the little princess's name was. She was so pretty and cute, like a perfectly animated doll. He didn't like the thought of her going hungry.

He shook his head. He took the trash out to the dumpster. He couldn't start feeling sorry for the royal squatters now. He had to get the castle back up and running—and soon—or Mielcarz would have his hide. And Jeremy very much liked his hide.

But he knew he had a couple of days before Mielcarz really started kicking. She was of a generation that believed any mechanical repair should take three days—and three days precisely. And so, without allowing himself to think about the ramifications, Jeremy left a hot dog on the castle, neatly segmented. He also left some popcorn and some pieces of candy.

Then he retreated and watched from a distance. It took quite a while, but eventually, something happened. Five servants in livery came out, retrieved the food gravely, and placed it on a litter they carried on their shoulders. They carried it with great dignity back into the castle.

Jeremy considered going over and looking through the window again, but he was running late for his date with Becky, so he left.

Becky was a fine, sturdy female with smooth white arms and hazel eyes that blazed. Her father did stuff with money, moving it one place and then moving it another place and somehow managing to make it grow in the process. Her mother spent all her time writing historically muddled novels of romance set in the Middle Ages (her passion for the era had contributed to the purchase of the Putt-Putt Golf Course as a birthday present for Becky when she was five) and often told Becky that she was fat.

Which Becky wasn't, comparatively speaking. She was big and blazing, and Jeremy liked how there was no problem of his that she could not dismiss with a wave of her hand. Not being a congenitally lively person himself, he appreciated being in the company of someone who could be counted on to direct things.

Tonight, however, he was in the unique position of knowing what he wanted to think (he wanted to think about the castle in general, and the blonde princess in particular) and he was getting somewhat annoyed with Becky's attempts to interest him in the plight of the oppressed.

Usually, Becky was the kind of person who didn't notice when people weren't interested in what she was saying, but this evening Jeremy's distraction was so obvious that she actually stopped speaking and peered at him bad-temperedly.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked. "You aren't engaging in my attempts to dialogue with you. You've put up a wall. That's a very capitalist thing to do."

Anything Becky didn't like was invariably a very capitalist thing to do. To his horror, Jeremy pondered actually saying this. But the moment of danger passed; he pressed his lips tightly together and played with his coffee cup.

"I'm listening," he lied.

"I said, I am going to be gone for a couple of weeks at a woman's empowerment retreat. I'm going to learn to get over the fear of self-expression that the male hegemony has imposed on me. Can you keep everything running while I'm gone?"

Becky had nothing to do with the operation of the golf course, but she liked to think that Jeremy could not make a move without her.

"It'll be fine," Jeremy said. Like always.

"Yeah, you say that." There was a spark in Becky's voice." But I just heard today from Mrs. Mielcarz that something's wrong with the castle."

"Nothing's wrong with it," Jeremy said quickly. "The motor ... burned out a belt is all. I just have to pick up a new one."

Jeremy rather enjoyed himself for the two weeks that Becky was gone. He kept the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course running smoothly, as he always had, and probably even more so, given that he didn't have to run off promptly at five to meet Becky at the Running Dog Anti-Imperialist Coffee Collective every night.

He amused himself by paying tribute to the castle's inhabitants. He brought leftover hotdogs to the castle, and watched as the castle's tiny inhabitants dragged them into the dining hall and feasted on them with much revelry and glee. He set up a hose in the moat and kept the shallow basin filled with fresh water. He used an aquarium pump to create a sparkling fountain in the center of the castle's reflecting pool. He began visiting a hobby shop in town and struck up a friendly acquaintance with the counterman, a fellow named Carl, who sold him numerous little special chairs and pillows. Jeremy left these for the castle's inhabitants.

Jeremy was overjoyed one day when the princess and her retinue came out in sedan chairs, draped with cobalt silks, flying pennants of red samite, to bathe and frolic. The princess floated on her back above the blue-painted bottom of the castle's reflecting pool, her blonde hair spreading around her head like a halo, little droplets of spray glistening on her face like diamonds.

One evening, after closing, Jeremy was arranging petunias in pots on the road up the causeway to the castle's main gate. It used to be where you hit the ball up, but he saw no reason it shouldn't be made pretty.

As he was fluffing a bloom, a tiny woman in a blue dress and a silver headdress came out of the front gates of the castle. This shocked Jeremy—none of the little creatures had ever come this close to him. It was clear that she was frightened; she trembled like a mouse. He held perfectly still, his hands covered with potting soil, his eyes downcast. She was pretty and delicate, and even though she was tiny, he could see her blush. She reached out her hand, and in it was a piece of parchment. Jeremy took it between two fingers, gingerly. He bobbed his head to the little woman, who wasn't his princess. She dropped a curtsy and hurried back through the gates of the castle.

The note was too tiny to read without the aid of a magnifying glass, but it said:

Noble giant, thou hast captured my heart. I would meet thee tomorrow at sunset.

It was signed,

Princess Koriander

The next day, on the way in to work, Jeremy picked up a packet of Ho-Hos from the 7-11. After the course closed for the day, he spent an hour cutting them into tiny morsels and arranging the morsels decoratively on a small china plate. At sunset, he went to meet the princess. He found that she, along with a retinue of a dozen knights with silken banners and ladies-in-waiting, had assembled on the topmost turret of the castle to greet him. The Ho-Hos were well received, especially the cream filling.

"Your strange foods delight and surprise us," said Princess Korian-

der, who had a voice like a tenderly plucked string. She gestured to her ladies' maid, the little woman in blue with the silver headdress who had so bravely brought him her tiny note. "Leonore, bring our gift for the generous giant."

Leonore curtsied, and returned with a tiny wooden cuckoo clock, a dark Bavarian-carved masterpiece. It was so small, and yet it worked perfectly. It was the most wonderful thing Jeremy had ever seen. He lifted it to his ear, and its ticking was like the sound of a flea tapdancing. He couldn't wait to see the matchhead-sized cuckoo chime the hour.

They whiled away many pleasant hours together that day, and on subsequent days. As she grew to trust him, their excursions became more far-ranging. Sometimes Jeremy would let the little princess and her maid climb into his pocket and he would take them to the farthest reaches of the Putt-Putt Golf Course, to the rushing waterfall on hole 2, or the Swiss Chalet at the very beginning of the course. Once he even showed her how the Coke machine worked. She squealed with delight, plugging her ears as the can clunked down.

"Sweet, divine nectar!" she said, when he served her a thimbleful. "Such wonders you show me, dear giant!"

Jeremy blushed. Never had he felt so large.

When Becky came back from her "Taking Back Women's Power" conference, he did not rush over to see her. In fact, he dodged her calls for a whole week, told her he had a cold and was contagious, and invented imaginary problems with his e-mail. And then she did something she never did. She came by the golf course.

"I've had a call from Mrs. Mielcarz," Becky said, leaning on the counter by the popcorn machine. "She says the castle hasn't been operational since before I left. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"No," he said.

"So you haven't fixed it? Mrs. Mielcarz is my best customer!" Becky reached into the popcorn machine, withdrew a bag. She popped kernels into her mouth as she paced up and down before the counter, flinty eyes regarding him suspiciously. "Are you trying to wreck my business, Jeremy?"

"No," Jeremy said again. "The castle's been giving me problems. It ... it might be out of commission for a long time."

"Unacceptable!" Becky barked, slamming the bag of corn down on the counter's glass surface. "That castle's the reason people come to the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course. I'll call my father. He'll get someone who knows something about castles down here in three seconds."

She had her cell phone out and was punching numbers; Jeremy strode quickly over to her, snatched the cell phone out of her hands. She stared at him in astonishment.

"Did you just grab that cell phone out of my hands?" she said, eyes widening. "That's abuse! I won't stand for it!" She looked around wildly, as if searching for a police officer.

Jeremy put the cell phone down on the glass counter quietly.

"What's wrong with you? You neglect your duties, you knock me down and grab cell phones out of my hand, and now you won't even tell me why!"

"There's nothing wrong with me," he said softly. "It's the castle. It's ... it's broken. It can't be fixed. So you just have to leave it alone. That's all."

"We'll see about that," Becky growled, storming out onto the course. Jeremy ran after her, heart pounding.

"No!" He screamed at her back. "Leave it alone! It's dangerous! The ... wiring! The wiring's all messed up! You'll get electrocuted!"

But Becky was already bent down beside the castle, which he'd surrounded with orange pylons and yellow "caution" tape. She had her hand over her eyes and was peering through the acetate windows.

"Looks fine to me," she began. Then he saw her face soften, go slack with surprise. She said nothing for a long time. Jeremy came to a stop in the center of the crushed-gravel pathway, breathing hard.

"Oh," he heard her whisper, in awe. "How cute!"

"Well, now, the first thing to do is set a few things straight!" Becky said, dusting off her hands as she straightened. She gestured to the castle. "Jeremy ... introduce me."

"Introduce you?"

"Yes. I assume you have a relationship with these little ... things?"

"Well ... yes. But they don't know you. It took a long time to get them to trust me!"

"Tell them I am your queen," she said, crossing her arms. "Even though the concept is odious to me, it is probably all they can understand."

Hesitantly, Jeremy went to the topmost turret and rang a little bell that he'd left there. It was his signal to Princess Koriander that he had brought her a gift. But this was a gift that he wasn't sure she was going to like, and it made Jeremy's heart pound even harder.

"Giant!" Princess Koriander burst out of the turret door, arms flung wide with pleasure, her cheeks flushed. When the little princess saw Becky's monstrous form, her smile faded slightly, and she assumed a more dignified posture.

"Princess Koriander," Jeremy said, making a little gesture. "This is ... my lady. Queen Becky of ..." his eyes darted around the golf course, landed on the first large building "... of the Snack Shack. She wishes an audience with your father."

"Oh," the princess looked at Becky. Her small, soft voice became even smaller. "I didn't know you had a lady."

"He most certainly does," Becky said, crossing her arms. "A very large and powerful lady. I am the ruler of all these lands. And I demand to speak to your father immediately."

The princess jumped as if she'd been stuck with a pin. She hurried back through the turret door. Jeremy listened to Becky tap her foot on the gravel as they waited. Finally, the king emerged, a picture of grave dignity in miniature. His courtiers sidled out behind him, eyeing Becky nervously.

"My Lady," said the king, inclining his head respectfully, then looking up at Becky. "My daughter tells me you are the Queen of the Snack Shack. I am pleased to receive you at my castle."

Becky grinned, but said nothing. She gave him a bow, apparently getting into the spirit of things.

"Pleased to meet you too, your excellency," she said, extravagantly. "I look forward to opening relations between your country and mine."

"Your ... consort ..." here the king looked at Jeremy, "... has already been quite a noble ambassador of your grace and dignity. He has shown my daughter many wonderful things."

"I'm sure he has," Becky said, her eyes glittering. "But now I wish to show you some things as well. I would love to meet with some of the ... younger members of your court. Perhaps they would profit from being instructed in the ways of my people?"

The king considered this.

"Perhaps so," he said. "But it is a long ride, through fields that are by day fraught with giants who do mysterious things with large white balls ..."

"Go home. Play with your poodle, go back to your meetings and your women's encounter group. These are real people, not some Communist Girl's doll house."

"I have the power to keep the others of my kind at bay," Becky waved a large hand. "And if you will but give me your leave, I will ensure that the trip for your young subjects is safe, comfortable, and swift."

The king looked at Jeremy.

"The giant has shown us many wonders," the king said. "We have come to regard him as very trustworthy. I will ask the brightest of my young men to attend your court."

Becky rubbed her hands together with glee. She grabbed Jeremy's arm, pulled him aside, spoke low words into his ear.

"You said you had a friend with a hobby shop, right?"

The next day, at the appointed hour, Becky unveiled the International Friendship Train. She and Jeremy had spent all night assembling the Tyco set. They built a comfortable little station right outside the palace and ran the tracks to the Snack Shack, to another little station just inside the door. As they worked, Jeremy realized that he'd never had so much fun with Becky before. She was as excited as a puppy, and could not stop talking about all the improvements that she planned to make.

"Real agriculture!" she said. "We can bring in good, fertile soil and let them grow their own food! And public works projects! They'll have to have public works projects, roads and bridges and ... oh, everything!" she paused, fitting a little train car onto the tracks. "Of course, we'll shut down the stupid golf course. It will be a haven for these people! Their own land!"

Jeremy smiled at her. She was so pretty when she was fired up about something. Maybe having these little people to love and care for would make her understand something about love. He'd heard that people often had children for just the same reason. He touched her hand as she finished putting the car on the track, and she smiled back at him.

When the young men came out of the castle and saw the train waiting at the station, they climbed onto it with whoops of excitement at the adventure that surely awaited them. It was clear that this Queen Becky of the Snack Shack had some amazing tricks up her sleeve! When they arrived at the Snack Shack, Becky began directing them to a little amphitheater she'd set up with tiny chairs and desks.

Jeremy started to pull up a chair, but Becky shooed him out of the room.

"Go buy dirt for the fields," she said to him, shoving a fat wad of cash into his hand. "And while you're out ... go and see if Carl has any tiny tractors."

It took Jeremy several hours to spend the money Becky had given him. It was more than enough for five big bags of potting soil, so he took it upon himself to grab a few extra things that he knew would make the Edelweissians' lives better: a bottle of liquid children's aspirin that would certainly last them years; some nonperishable foodstuffs such as peanut butter (smooth, not chunky) and beef jerky; and a string of pretty little Christmas lights they could use to light the inside of the castle. Much safer than the tiny candles and torches they had been using ...

Dusk had turned to dark when he arrived back at the Snack Shack, but light still blazed out of all the windows. He let himself in silently, and found, to his surprise, that Becky's guests from the castle were still there—well over four hours later. The tiny young men sat slumped in their tiny chairs, drinking from thimbles of black coffee. They all looked exhausted. Becky was pacing back and forth in front of the popcorn machine. She had a small whiteboard (the one on which Jeremy usually wrote "Two-for-one special today!") and had covered it with now-unintelligible scribbles, all connected by vicious strokes of the dry-erase marker; the words "worker" and "means of production" were all he could make out.

"... I ask you again ... are you going to die for some king?" Becky's voice was high and shrill, and there were flecks of spittle at the corners of her mouth. "Some king who expects you to bow to him and scrape like a bunch of servile ..."

"Becky!" Jeremy barked, dropping the bags he'd been carrying with a clank and a rattle. Becky startled; dozens of red-rimmed little eyes jerked up to look at him.

"Hello, Jeremy," Becky said. "Did you bring the tractors?"

"How dare you?" Jeremy was furious. "How dare you! Leave them alone!" he stalked over to where they all sat. He switched on the model train set and opened all the tiny little doors. "Go on home now."

The little men didn't move. They all looked up Becky, uncertainly. She stood, arms crossed.

"Yes, I supposed it is getting a bit late," she said, finally. "Little brothers, you're dismissed."

The young men climbed into the train and Jeremy knelt down and flipped the switch that would take them back to the castle. When they were gone, Jeremy stormed over to Becky.

"I won't have it," he said, his voice low.

"You won't have what?"

"I won't have you filling their heads with ... half-baked political claptrap!"

"You think they're happier living under a patriarchal, imperialist ..."

"They haven't had any problems with it so far!"

"That's not what I hear," Becky said, examining her nails.

"These are good little people," Jeremy pleaded. "They've got things figured out all right for themselves."

"How patronizing you are," Becky spat at him. "As if you can take care of them, like some kind of Great White Father. Well, they don't need you. They can make things better for themselves."

"What do they need to make better?" Jeremy fairly shrieked. "What's wrong with how they live?"

She shook her head, but did not answer. Then, Jeremy really did take her arm, and he really did give her a shake. She stared at him, stunned at the violence of the action.

"You're going to leave them alone, Becky," he barked at her. "In fact, I want you to leave. Go home. Play with your poodle, go back to your meetings and your women's encounter group. These are real people, not some Communist Girl's doll house!"

Becky shook his hand off her arm and stepped back. Her eyes burned with a horrible brilliance Jeremy had never seen in them before.

"Get this straight," she said. "I own this golf course. And hence, I own these people. If I want to give them a taste of freedom, that's what I'm going to do." She paused. "And if anyone's going to leave, it's going to be you. Get out!"

Jeremy felt himself choking. His hands clenched into fists, and he imagined hitting Becky with them. But he didn't.

"I won't go!" he spat.

"I'm calling the cops now," she said, picking up the phone and punching the 911 button. He stood staring at her a long time, until he imagined he could hear a siren in the distance.

"You haven't heard the last of this," Jeremy said.

Jeremy was fired the next day.

He got his pink slip from Becky personally. She arrived at his apartment at 6 AM, knocking loudly on the door. She looked rumpled and mussed, as if she'd been up all night. She arrived with a lawyer, someone her father had retained for her. She accomplished his firing with brisk efficiency, informing him of his many weaknesses of character and multifaced dereliction of duty: including, but not limited to, failing to take the trash out. To show that she wasn't a heartless parasite, she accompanied the pink slip with a $500 severance bonus on top of his final pay. She informed him, at the end of the interview, that their relationship status had been downgraded to "acquaintance." She demanded the return of his key to the Snack Shack.

She delivered the pink slip; the lawyer delivered the restraining order.

Jeremy spent the rest of the day sitting on his couch, in his underwear, staring at the restraining order. It promised legal retribution of exceptional unpleasantness if he violated it. He was not at all upset about losing his job or losing Becky—those losses made him feel

exceptionally light, as if a crushing painful weight had been lifted from his chest. But the loss of his princess, the loss of Princess Koriander ...

He knew that Becky was not a wantonly cruel person. Maybe she'd really would help them. Help them get crops started, help them learn modern ways. Maybe she had a point. Maybe he was rationalizing oppression by imagining it as a bucolic fantasy of innocence and honor. He considered tractors and soil, and wondered if he should go back to Becky and apologize.

The phone rang. He picked it up and was surprised to hear Mrs. Mielcarz's voice crackling along the line.

"What the hell is going on at the golf course?" Mrs. Mielcarz blasted in his ear. "What's the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of what?"

"There's a big 'going out of business' sign on the front door!"

"I don't work there anymore, Mrs. Mielcarz," Jeremy said, dread solidifying in his gut.

"Well, someone's put up black plastic around all the fences; you can't even see in anymore. And there's smoke coming from inside, and strange noises ... it sounds like animals! Are you holding cock fights in there? Because if you are, I'll report you to the police ..."

Jeremy left the phone dangling and ran out of the apartment.

It was the smell that he noticed first, the smell of burning wood and oil. He flung himself out of the door of his Ford Festiva. Becky's Mercedes wasn't in the parking lot, but all the lights were on. He saw smoke rising up from behind the black-plastic-wrapped cyclone fencing. God, had she gone to get the fire department?

With shaking hands, he used the spare key that Becky hadn't confiscated to open the back door, and he ran onto the golf course, and into the middle of a revolution.

It took several seconds for his eyes to register it all. The miniature guillotine set up in the square—under the floodlights that illuminated the course, it was stained black. There were a half dozen little bodies around it, including one dressed in imperial purple. Jeremy put a hand over his mouth, his gut roiling. And there were fires burning all around the golf course; the little village had been torched, even the painted children in suspenders and lederhosen. He looked at the castle; there were red and gold flags waving from its walls, flags he'd never seen before.

Then he heard a high-pitched rumbling, like the sound of a multitude of tiny shouts, coming from inside the toolshed, where he kept all his tools and maintenance equipment.

He ran for the door of the shed, threw it open. There were hundreds ... no, thousands ... of little people inside. Every surface was packed with them, shouting and screeching and brandishing every kind of weapon imaginable: tiny pitchforks and shovels, along with toothpicks and razor blades. Jeremy's head spun. How many were in there? The castle couldn't possibly hold that many!

They were all shaking those pitchforks and shovels and toothpicks and razor blades at something small that was huddled up in the shed's rafters, trembling like a wet cat.

It was Princess Koriander.

With a roar, Jeremy stormed through the door, doing his best to avoid stepping on the little people, trying to brush them aside with his shoes. This was made more difficult by the fact that the little people were stabbing and beating at him, puncturing his ankles and calves. He winced, stumbling as a particularly sharp slash from one of the razor blades opened a gash in his ankle; he went down hard on his other foot to catch himself, feeling a sickening crunching sliding underneath his shoe. He felt like he was going to be sick. He reached up.

"Princess Koriander! Hurry!"

Princess Koriander scrambled for the safety of his hand. He tucked her close to his chest as he backed carefully out of the maintenance shed. He felt blood flowing down his ankle, squishing in his shoe. A few long strides brought them to the safety of the Snack Shack, and face to face with Becky, who was unloading pizzas from her trunk.

"Jeremy!" she screamed. She saw the princess in Jeremy's hand. "You give her back! She's mine! I'll ..."

"You'll what? Call the cops?" Jeremy climbed into his car, tucking Koriander inside a slightly damp Big Gulp cup for her protection. "Call 'em. I'll tell them everything.

Then he threw the Ford Festiva into reverse and floored it, spraying Becky with gravel.

Jeremy brought the little princess to his apartment. He made her a nice warm place to sleep in a shoebox. He brought her water and a little snippet of cloth she could use to wash herself.

"You brought her to us!" Princess Koriander sobbed, tears streaking down her dirty face. She caught them with the tiny snippet of cloth. She looked up at Jeremy with eyes that contained unbearable hurt. "We trusted you!"

Jeremy hung his head. Once, he'd thought he knew what guilt was. Once, he'd thought guilt was not emptying the trash cans. Now he knew much better.

"I will help you win back your throne," he promised, extending a finger to touch her shining yellow hair. "I'm so sorry."

That night, he went to see Becky. He parked down the street from the Putt-Putt Golf Course, first making sure that no blue-and-red cop lights were spinning outside it. In his pocket, he carried the princess's colors, a stamp-sized handkerchief stained with blood.

When he stepped into the Snack Shack, he looked around with surprise. It had been redecorated with red and gold flags, and a desk had been set up in the center of it. A nameplate on the desk read "Comrade Becky."

Comrade Becky bent over the desk, scribbling paperwork. When he entered, she leaned back in her chair, eyed him with the coldness of a bureaucrat.

"I'm here on a diplomatic mission from the rightful heir to the throne of the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course," Jeremy said.

Comrade Becky curled her lip in a sneer.

"The People's Republic of the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course does not recognize imperialist scoundrels," she said, as if delivering the words from a podium.

"She wants her throne back," Jeremy continued. "Her people back. She won't press charges for the death of her father ..."

"Hah!" Comrade Becky barked. "Press charges? In what court! The land is now under the governance of the Central Committee. And they're the very ones who sentenced the old bugger to death in the first place!"

"There are higher laws," Jeremy said.

"Not in this case," Comrade Becky said. "I brought freedom to these people. Besides, it's my Putt-Putt Golf Course. I can do what I want."

Jeremy's heart sank at the glee in Becky's voice.

"Of course, you know," he said, "this means war."

"First, we have to get as many loyalists out at possible," Jeremy said when he returned to deliver Comrade Becky's dismissive answer to the princess. "There must be a way to help the refugees get to freedom. I can't stand the thought of what she's doing to them!"

"I know a place," Princess Koriander said. "The young men of the castle used to speak about a hole in the wall that surrounds our lands. They would dare each other to walk through it. On the other side was a broad plain, filled with ferocious beasts made entirely of metal." She paused, lowered her head sadly. "Anyone in the castle who is still loyal to myself or my poor martyred father would think braving such dangers less terrible than what has already befallen us."

"Right," Jeremy said. "I know the place you're talking about. That hole in the wall goes through to old man Lawson's back lot. He keeps junk cars back there. I'm sure he won't notice if we set a few things up."

That night, Jeremy and the princess crept through the weedy lot behind the course. Beside the hole in the wall, they set up a discreet little aid station. They supplied it with water, food, and small notes

When Jeremy saw that his poodle repellent and miniature airplanes stuffed with refugee commandos on midnight raids weren't working, he gave up.

directing refugees to a place where they could wait in safety to be picked up by Koriander and Jeremy. Koriander gave these notes the imprimatur of her royal seal, a miniscule ring of gold that made an imprint no bigger than a pinprick. She looked so adorable in the Barbie doll outfits Jeremy had picked up for her; the slacks bagged around her ankles, and the coats were a bit big in the chest, but she glowed with purpose and determination. He wished he could kiss her.

They successfully ferried refugees for a week, bringing them back to the safety of Jeremy's apartment, where he set up a number of little encampments in his living room. He had to stomp out cooking fires once or twice, and he had to calm down nervous refugees who recoiled in terror when the fire alarm went off, but for the most part, he was able to make them comfortable. Princess Koriander slept in his room, on top of his bookcase, in a box he'd lined with a piece of velvet.

They were just beginning to feel rather pleased with their success, until they came back one day and found the aid station smashed and burned. There was the sound of brutish poodles roaming around the other side of the fence, yipping and snapping. The hole had been boarded over, and a note written in blood tacked up:

"Closed by order of the Reformed Central Committee of the Second People's Republic of the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course."

As they drove home, with Princess Koriander riding in his breast pocket, Jeremy shook his head and sighed heavily.

"Don't despair, noble giant!" Koriander implored him. "We will find another way to help my people! We must never give up on them!"

Jeremy sighed again.

"I know, Koriander," he said. She'd insisted long before that he drop the honorific "Princess," and it had taken some getting used to. "But ... well, it's just that I'm running out of money. Your people don't eat much, but even so, there's only so much ramen a person, big or small, can eat. If only I had a job, or something to sell ..."

He suddenly remembered something. The tapdancing of a flea.

"Yes, dear giant?" Koriander prompted him gently, placing a tiny hand on his chest. "You have an idea?"

He smiled down at her fondly. "Yes," he said. "I have an idea."

"This isn't so much a miniature as it is a work of art!" Carl took the loupe out of his eye, turned the tiny cuckoo clock back and forth between admiring fingers. "It's exquisite! Amazing!"

"So you can sell them?" Jeremy felt like wiggling with delight. "Think you can get a good price for them?"

"Oh, sure, I'll sell them," Carl said. "I'll take all you have! But workmanship like this ... I don't even know how I could put a price on it! I could sell this for $10,000 and that would still be too cheap!" He rubbed his chin, placing the tiny clock down gently on the counter. He looked at Jeremy.

"Listen, I have a friend. He sets up e-commerce Web sites. Let's give him a call."

Within six months, Jeremy's online store, "Historic Edelweiss Village Miniatures" (a name that Koriander had been extremely proud of coming up with) was pulling in over a hundred grand a month, and the larger apartment into which Jeremy had moved the whole diaspora was a hum of constant activity.

They sold the tiny clocks mostly to extremely rich, extremely selective European clients. Jeremy invested thousands in noble schemes to get the remaining Edelweissians over the wall, but they were largely unsuccessful—Comrade Becky and her Second Re-Reformed Central Committee saw to that. When Jeremy saw that his poodle repellent and miniature airplanes stuffed with refugee commandoes on midnight raids weren't working, he gave up. He purchased a huge plot of land with a real lake on it. He built a larger, more beautiful castle on the shores of this lake, and brought Koriander to sit on its throne as its queen—Queen of the the Great and Autonomous Empire of Koriandia. The land prospered. The people celebrated. Exports flowed out in even greater variety and quantity, and money from the Web site flowed in.

While this was just the place for the insertion of a happy ending, Queen Koriander, being a Queen, was not satisfied to let matters rest there.

Within a year's time, the media had discovered the story of Queen Koriander and her people, despite Jeremy's best efforts to keep it all a secret. Jeremy even wondered, in later days, if Queen Koriander herself had not had a hand in sending the brave little emissary to the office of the local paper with a satchel full of information about her people and the noble struggle in which they'd been involved. Soon it was a cause célebre, and the Great and Autonomous Land of Koriandia opened its borders to welcome giants of all races, creeds, and religions as the queen's guests. The concession sales alone brought in millions. Jeremy had quite a time keeping it all straight.

Indeed, it was possibly Jeremy's difficulty keeping track of all the money that resulted in the ease with which Queen Koriander was able to siphon off $50,000 to pay an elite hit man, a giant by the name of Bruno, to go and shoot Comrade Becky in the head. Which Bruno did, most efficiently. At which point the police took a great deal of interest in Jeremy, and things were sticky for a while.

"But they always are, where queens are concerned," Koriander assured him, when he flew to her in a spasm of guilt. "We have many lawyers who will see that no harm comes to you. My dear giant. My beloved giant."

Indeed, the wrongful death lawsuit that Comrade Becky's father brought against him was handled with briskness and dispatch, and it was determined that Jeremy had nothing to do with Comrade Becky's assassination. The civil suit received a notably small amount of press attention, given that reporters were more interested in the humanitarian crisis that had begun brewing at the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course after the death of their tyrannical dictator.

Queen Koriander was invited to return to govern her people. It wasn't an unqualified success.

"But it never is, where queens are concerned," Koriander mentioned to him, when Jeremy asked her why the curfews had to be quite so strict, and the tiny guns in the hands of her occupying forces quite so deadly. "But don't worry, my dear giant. My beloved giant. I've decided that it's not worth trying to rule the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course and Koriandia at the same time. I have an idea. Will you help me?"

The people of the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course, her erstwhile subjects, were allowed to hold democratic elections, under the condition that everyone cast their vote for Jeremy, the gentle giant, the hero who had helped bring an end to the tyranny of Comrade Becky's brutal and tyrannical regime.

"Let this signify a new era of peace and prosperity for the Democratic Republic of the Edelweiss Village Putt-Putt Golf Course!" Queen Koriander proclaimed, as the last of the occupation forces from Koriandia marched out of the front door of the Snack Shack in glorious procession.

President Jeremy watched them go. He sighed. He was right back where he started, except that now there was sure to be way more trash to take out. ❧

Richard [illegible] Remade led his clockwork army to the [illegible] of Blessed Spire and pounded his fist against the door.

"Prepare for the dawn, Flesh King," he said. "Your [illegible]ands at the threshold."

Ticks and whirs filled the predawn air as his soldiers continued to enter the valley. They flowed from the narrow mountain pass like an iron serpent, eyes blazing with lamplight, steam spewing from ruptured hydraulics. Warm man-blood and the oil of fallen comrades painted their damaged bodies, a testament to the furious battle that had gained them the pass. Even now, their hold on the pass was tenuous; the Flesh King's forces raged against their flank in an effort to regain lost ground.

Richard entered a code into his forearm keypad. A silver panel slid open on his thigh, and from the storage space within he took a small sphere. The surface glowed warm and red against his palm, like it was filled with embers, and the sphere hummed with life. This was The Union, the Tinker King's greatest creation, and the sight of it strengthened his convictions.

He hammered at the door again, but Blessed Spire remained silent. His gaze traveled skyward, past the great arched doorway, across the slippery span of black stone and lichen-crusted mortar, finally settling on the structure's only window, a wide opening shaped like an inverted star draped in the

BLOOD AND

shadows of the Spire's crenellated roof.

"The Brotherhood of the Flesh falls today," he said, raising his voice above the tumult. "Make your peace, father."

Simon Hollowmander couldn't hear these words from his chamber, but he didn't have to. He knew the castoff had at last come to end his reign. Only now, with the whelp and his horde battering at his sanctuary, did he truly believe the prophecy. Yet some part of his soul—his very humanity, perhaps—still fostered a hope that Richard the Unman could be defeated.

"Lord! He stands at our very door!" Grackle perched on the stone sill of the inverted star window, scaly wings clenched against his back. A translucent sheen of silver flame burned across his blue skin, a product of the imp's agitation. "The Unman! The Remade!"

Simon did not respond. Of course the Unman had come. Body by body, league by league, the whelp's army had advanced. Slicing living flesh with blasphemous metal talons, and stealing men's breath with suction cannons. All to reach this place, so Richard the Remade might finally fulfill his destiny.

"Lord, the Unman has summoned a pneumastodon." Grackle scurried to the top of the star, and dangled from the cold stone. "They mean to break down the door."

Simon remained seated in his high-backed leather chair, listening to flames crackle in the

OIL

Doing evil toward a good end is a recipe for disaster. But what happens if, by destroying the evil, you also destroy the good?

BY JOSH ROUNTREE ILLUSTRATION BY ALLEN DOUGLAS

hearth and hoping this would not be the last time he'd enjoy the scent of burning pine. He chewed at the hem of his cloak, working for every drop of blood that still stained it. His guilt at tasting the blood of his closest advisers could not be outweighed by the power and sense of clarity that was slowly returning to his mind. He felt the magic begin to stir in his heart, and he knew his coterie's sacrifice had been necessary.

"Forgive me, my brothers. My sister. There was no other way. Go to your reward knowing your sacrifice will allow our way of life to continue." Simon directed his sentiments toward the ghostly flames, his back turned to the corpses cooling on the sapphire tiles.

A heavy thump sounded from below; no doubt the pneumastodon beginning its work. The blow shook the Spire, and Grackle nearly lost his perch.

"The door won't hold long. The creature may topple the tower itself." The imp burned with fear.

Simon licked blood from his palms.

Then he closed his eyes and summoned the ancient ones.

"Do you plan to storm this citadel alone?" asked Chum, his canine jaws snapping open and closed with a rusty squeal. He was a first generation clockwork beast, a collection of iron, springs and cogs that vaguely resembled a dog. According to Chum, his mechanism had functioned flawlessly for over one hundred years.

"I doubt any storming will be required," said Richard, keeping a safe distance from the pneumastodon battering the door. Already, the ancient oak slab showed signs of cracking. "If the Flesh King had any solders left in the Spire, they'd be upon us by now. I doubt he has more than a handful of house guards on hand, and a few zealots left to advise him. I won't have a problem."

"Take me with you, sir. Just in case. Or better yet, take Captain Flex."

Richard smiled. It was unlikely that Captain Flex would fit through the door, let alone be able to climb the stairway to the top.

"Thank you, but I have to face him alone." It was one of the few things of which he was certain. A full understanding of the prophecy continued to elude him, even as it ran endlessly through his thoughts:

Flesh King, fear no man.

Flesh King, fear no machine.

Flesh King, fear thy child.

Soul to soul, heart to heart.

He delivers your fate.

All the oracles could tell for certain was that Richard must face his father and deliver the Tinker King's gift. Fate's hand would write the rest of the story.

The pneumastodon delivered another blow with its high-pressure hammer and the door to Blessed Spire burst into two splintered pieces of wood. They fell away to reveal a darkened entry chamber, marred only by soft torchlight. The smell of blood pervaded the air.

"The Flesh King is feeding," said Richard. "We must hurry."

It was as Richard had feared. The old villain was calling his magic— at the expense of the very lives he fought to keep pure.

Without warning, a buzz arose from the assembled army. Heads turned skyward and Richard followed their gaze. Several shapes moved through the night sky, lithe, serpentine bodies the size of hundred year oaks, held aloft by massive wings. They glided across the stony tips of the surrounding mountain range, then dove for the valley.

"What deviltry is this?" asked Chum, as the legion of clockmen began to scramble for cover. "They look like giant serpents."

"Not serpents," said Richard, hoping to mask the despair in his voice. "Dragons."

Simon slumped in his chair. The summoning had sapped his magic, leaving him momentarily stunned. Light exploded through the window as the dragons directed white hot exhalations at the Unman's army. Grackle danced on the windowsill, laughing at the enemy's plight.

"Come see this, Lord!" he said, beckoning his master with a gnarled hand. "The skinhaters are no match for your dragons."

Simon pushed himself up from the chair and moved away from the window. He had no desire to witness the spectacle. He'd been on the battlefield in the first war with the Tinker King's rabble, and he knew well what dragon heat could do to simple iron. It hadn't been Simon that summoned the dragons that day, but the first Flesh King, Alabaster Rose. The man who'd first united all the creatures of life and breath against the soulless machines. The man who'd groomed Simon Hollowmander to be his like-minded successor.

The man whose corpse now stiffened in a sticky pool of blood in Simon's antechamber.

Simon crossed the floor on unsteady feet, ignoring Grackle's constant chatter. He entered the antechamber and knelt by his mentor's body, hoping his departed soul would understand why Simon had taken his life. Blood no longer flowed from the old man's veins, but instead pooled in his open chest cavity.

"I'm sorry," whispered Simon. Then he lowered his head to drink.

After he'd taken what power he could from the greatest man he'd ever known, he crawled across the floor to his other victims: Thomas the Hollow, the stalwart old general who'd single-handedly sabotaged the Tinker King's perpetual motion project; Father Spleen, the priest who'd first spoken out against the soulless masses, the very founder of Simon's faith; and perhaps worst of all, Rebecca Slip, sweet Rebecca who'd been his companion since the heady days of youth when they'd shared battlefields, and for one exceptionally warm summer, a bed.

Drinking their blood was a vile act, but he felt the magic slipping back into his body like icy water. He had no other options. Without his magic, he couldn't hope to defeat his vengeful son. Blood is life, life is magic, and so it had always been. But the taking of blood to fight for the Flesh was the blackest of ironies, and Simon knew that win or lose, his soul would never recover.

"Come to the window, Lord!" said Grackle, breaking the silence of Simon's communion. "Raise your nose to the air. Can you smell it?"

Simon flared his nostrils, and yes, he could smell it. A supernatural stench that banished all others, crawling across the valley and scaling the Spire, permeating the air with its nauseating presence. Bile and dirt; mold and rot. It smelled like cheated death.

Simon smiled in spite of his grief. General Sliver had retaken the pass.

Richard's clockmen were routed; they fled in every direction, searching for an escape route that didn't exist. With each screaming descent, the dragons exhaled heat blasts that wavered in the sky like airborne mirages, and turned entire regiments into melted slabs of ore. Richard's steam troops fared marginally better. They held their positions, striking back with airshells and jets of boiling water. But even the steam troops were creatures of metal, and like the clockmen, they had no defense for dragon breath.

Richard stood frozen between his desire to rally the troops and the desperate call of the open doorway. Chum circled him on spindly legs, urging him to action.

"The ranks have broken!" he said. "What are you doing? Lead these soldiers or they'll die!"

"They'll die anyway if I don't face the Flesh King."

"The Flesh King can wait!"

"No. I'm going inside. He controls the dragons. Kill him and they'll flee back to Hell." Richard approached the door, then turned back to instruct his captain. "Do your best, Chum. Find your regiment if it still exists and hold these demons at bay for as long as possible."

The dimming of Chum's eye lamps told Richard that his friend did not agree with his decision. But Chum understood his role in this army, and he was not the sort to question his superior. He turned without a word and entered the fray. With a warrior's instinct, honed on battlegrounds beyond count, Chum seized control of a fleeing band of clockmen and redirected them toward the struggle.

"We can defeat them with numbers," he said. "When they come in low, let fly with your harpoons. We'll drag the demons down!"

Feeling the weakness crawl over him, Simon again turned to the blood, kneeling among his murdered comrades and lapping their life from the floor like a common dog, fighting for every drop of magic.

Richard turned back to the door and prepared for the dark ascent.

A deafening shriek shocked his aural processor, and a crushing slab of heat knocked him to the earth. He stumbled to his feet in time to see a dragon with scales the color of river mud sweeping skyward. In the monster's wake, a shiny pool of metal hardened, steam rising into the air like souls departing for their next existence. Richard had avoided the attack, shoved away by the force of displaced air. Chum and his band of clockmen had not been as fortunate.

"Demon!" yelled Richard, his duty sidetracked by the sudden sense of loss that crawled through his fluids like an infection. How many times had that brave beast saved his life? All these years, all these leagues together—only for Chum to meet his destruction at victory's doorstep. It seemed like an impossible nightmare.

The dragon spun and prepared for another pass. It regarded him with frightening intelligence, then roaring with evident triumph, it dove. The lust in the monster's eyes told Richard everything. This ancient beast knew him—Richard the Remade, Richard the Unman, Simon Hollowmander's castoff. This creature saw a chance to destroy the Tinker King's champion, and secure once and for all the supremacy of the Flesh.

Richard unsheathed his sword from his iron spine. It was little defense against such a threat, but better than facing his death empty handed. For a second, he considered breaking for the door, but Chum's memory stayed his feet. Richard bent his knees and prepared to leap when the dragon exhaled. All this way. All these years. He could not die this close to the end.

He would not.

"Bring your soul, demon, and I'll release it to Hell!"

White flames danced in the dragon's nostrils, and when it opened its mouth to rage, Richard saw the same flames pouring from its throat. The heat blast was coming.

The Unman shot sideways and prepared to bring his sword against the dragon's back. The heat blast never came. Just as Richard dove to avoid the dragon's attack, a giant hand seized the monster and plucked it from the air.

Captain Flex held the dragon by the throat; its lashing tail barely reached the ground. Flex was a bronze giant, one of the few success stories to emerge from the early days of the Tinker King's smelting chambers, and the most valuable member of Richard's officer corps. The rotund giant resembled a huge brass cauldron with fat arms and legs. Coal burned brightly behind the grate in his belly, and smoke funneled through his neck and out the small exhaust holes on either side of his head. His face was flat and expressionless, with square eyeholes to emit light and a rectangular mouth for speech.

Still holding his foe, Flex opened his belly grate. The dragon clawed at the giant with its tiny forearms, but its talons left nothing but superficial scratches on Flex's glimmering surface. The giant kept a tight grip on the monster's throat, and its repeated attempts to choke out heat waves yielded no result. With eerie precision, Flex grabbed the dragon's tail, wound the struggling creature into a ball, and shoved it into his gut.

The dragon writhed in the flames, lashing against Flex's interior, but the Tinker King's workmanship held fast. The smoke rising from Flex's head became a noxious green cloud.

The giant's massive head craned downward, until his hollow eyes made contact with Richard. When he spoke, it was with his customary brevity.

"Finish this."

Richard nodded, momentarily unable to take his eyes off the burning dragon. Slowly, the giant turned away, and Richard did likewise. Flex headed back to the battlefield.

With his sword in hand, the Unman crossed the threshold of Blessed Spire.

Simon watched the battle from the great star window, one hand against the sill to brace himself against the building's shudders.

Mountain walls ringed the valley, forming a writhing cauldron of blood, oil, and white dragon fire. Several of the great beasts lay dead on the battle plain, victims of the construct army's crude weaponry, wings shredded by the flow of metallic feet. Others prowled the air, borne up by steam blasts and smoke billows that rose from blazing grassland.

General Sliver's troops poured through the pass, taking advantage of the sudden confusion. Though they were technically creatures of the flesh, Simon still found them revolting—reanimated corpses, scraped from past battlefields and conscribed into eternal service. Not unlike the clockmen who routinely salvaged parts from dead comrades so they might continue their blasphemous existence. But the undead troops were a necessary evil, and they were, after all, creatures of the magic. They existed only to serve the Brotherhood.

Their presence had certainly turned the tide of battle.

"The dead men won't let the enemy flee," said Grackle, roosting at his master's side. "They're herding them back toward the dragons."

"I have eyes, imp."

Blessed Spire shook again, rattling the furniture and causing several goblets to shatter against the tiles. Below, the pneumastodons assaulted the walls with their great elephantine bodies. Their handlers had fled to bolster the enemy flank, and now they rampaged haphazardly, hammering Simon's ancient sanctuary in their terror and confusion.

"Pray they don't bring our walls down, Lord," said Grackle.

"This sanctuary has stood for ages without toppling. I hardly think a band of mindless machines is equal to the task." Simon spoke with

conviction, but in reality, he wasn't so certain. Tiny cracks appeared in the walls, and the Spire moaned in protest with each blow. But no matter. Let the walls fall. The Unman would be here soon, and once Simon had taken his life, the Brotherhood of the Flesh would reign eternal.

"Our victory comes today, Lord," said Grackle. "These rabble forces will fall within the hour."

"Perhaps. But there is another foe to consider."

"The Unman? He cannot stand against you."

"Yet he will. It's been foretold."

"But you'll prevail."

"I sincerely hope that's the case," said Simon. "You know you can't be here when he arrives. We must face one another alone."

"Yes, Lord. But if you'll allow it, I'll perform one more service for you. He'll be entering the Spire soon, if he hasn't already. I can perform a simple firejump and perhaps gain some valuable information about your foe. Or at the very least, provide you a moment of advanced notice."

Simon smiled. "Yes, Grackle. Perform your service, report back to me, and then leave this plane. Flesh willing, I'll call you to me again."

The imp bowed his head and then flew to the fireplace. He stared at the leaping red flames for several seconds, eyes closed in concentration. He then stepped into the fire and vanished in a burst of silver sparks.

Simon Hollowmander stood alone in his chamber and waited for his son.

Richard ascended Blessed Spire's spiral stairway, advancing cautiously, sword in hand. He'd yet to encounter even a modest resistance, and by the time he reached what he judged to be the midway point, Richard knew there would be no guards or soldiers to bar his path.

They were dead. All of them.

Bodies filled the landings, lay sprawled on the stairway, clung to the walls in pieces. House guards with dented helms and discarded pikes, serving women fallen among shattered platters of fruits and cheese, children, an elderly man, even a few wiry cats. The Spire had become a murderer's paradise. The sheer volume of blood that painted the walls was difficult to comprehend. Who had the power and the inclination to commit such an atrocity?

The Flesh King, of course. The man who supposedly valued living creatures above all other things.

"Simon Hollowmander is a madman," said Richard as he picked his way carefully over the bodies. The bloodshed sickened him, but the reason for the bloodshed terrified him. The Flesh King was drawing power to himself. This was more than enough blood to summon the dragons. This was enough life to fuel untold destruction.

How many dead faces leered at him in the flickering torchlight? One hundred? One thousand? It was impossible to tell. Their number must be added to the countless beings—flesh and construct—who'd fallen so the Flesh King's bastard could claim his destiny.

Richard the Remade. construct messiah.

Blessed Spire shook violently in the wake of some unknown assault. The dragons, maybe the pneumastodons? It made no difference as long as he reached the Flesh King's chamber in time to deliver the Tinker King's gift.

As he neared the top of the Spire, the flames in the hallway sconces flared violently, as if stoked by some unfelt wind. The light from the nearest sconce faded to blue, and narrow eyes flickered in the flames. Richard approached, watching the apparition from the corner of his eyes. As he passed the sconce, the eyes leaned closer; a scaly head emerged from the fire.

Richard waited. Waited.

Then he lunged.

Simon became quite certain that Blessed Spire would fall. The pneumastodon assault had intensified, and tiles began to lift from the floor. Clouds of silt and mortar drifted from the ceiling, and stones tumbled from the wall.

He stood before the fireplace, waiting for Grackle's return, praying the magic would hold a bit longer. Already it leaked from his body, sapped by his need to control the dragons and the very force of will it took to keep Blessed Spire from crumbling to ruins. He considered releasing the dragons from his hold, but rejected the idea. They kept the clockwork army at bay. What else would stop them from rushing to their Remade leader's aid? Simon Hollowmander knew they must face one another alone, and he would adhere to that stricture of the prophecy. But he had no assurances his foe would display the same amount of honor.

The walls crumbled around him and it seemed as if the very earth gnawed at the ancient citadel's roots. The Spire swayed, then righted itself. Feeling the weakness crawl over him, Simon again turned to the blood, kneeling among his murdered comrades and lapping their life from the floor like a common dog, fighting for every drop of magic. And it was in this desperate state that Simon heard the chamber door swing open, and found himself surprised by the enemy.

Richard the Unman stood in the doorway, a hideous marriage of flesh and iron. Both legs and one heavy arm had been forged in the Tinker King's cauldrons, though the craftsmanship was far beyond that applied to a typical construct. When he stepped into the room, Richard's limbs moved in an easy, fluid fashion, nothing like the lurching advance of a clockman or the slow hissing steps of steamers.

Richard's right arm remained flesh, as did his chest and head, save for the brown metal cap that replaced his scalp. He carried an old-fashioned sword in one hand, like some savage warrior from story-

Blackness fell like a burial shroud, and he could no longer feel the warm flow of oil and blood pouring from his body, or the morning wind's chill as it swirled through the doomed building's walls.

book antiquity. Grackle's severed head hung from his other hand, eyes glassy, fire extinguished.

So this was the man who'd denied his own kind. The fool who'd willingly succumbed to the Tinker King's experiments and become a hideous half-man. And he'd murdered Grackle, the last companion Simon had left in the world. Anger and revulsion welled in his soul, and a feral cry rose from his throat, the nearly forgotten voice

of his prehuman ancestry.

The Flesh King rose to his feet and focused his hate.

Richard stepped into Hell.

Blood pooled on the floor, drenched the walls, stained overturned furniture and fallen tapestries. The ceiling was falling, and the leaning Spire screamed in anguish. Amid the rubble, several bodies lay dead, chests open, flesh torn. And kneeling among them, an aged man. Drinking.

The man looked up when he heard the door open, and Richard knew at once this was the Flesh King. They shared the same prominent nose and shadowy green eyes, the same crooked ears. But there his humanity ended. Simon Hollowmander appeared more animal than human, crouched like he was preparing to pounce, fingers gnarled and tipped with chipped talons, silver hair falling in wispy strings from his balding pate. He was bathed in blood, wallowing in human death. He was a monster.

Richard still held the dead spy's head in his hand, and when the Flesh King noticed it, he emitted an inhuman squeal and leapt to his feet. His mouth was a wide circle of sharpened teeth. Blood dripped from his outstretched arms like bath water.

"Your blasphemy ends today," said Simon, color slowly creeping into his face. "You who denied your flesh for that heretic's metal."

"The Tinker King simply fixed what you left broken," said Richard. "He gave me a purpose."

Simon smiled. "Come then, Unman. Kill me and fulfill your destiny. If you think you have the might."

"Your death would not be enough, father," said Richard, not liking the feel of the word on his tongue. He tossed the imp's head to the floor and removed The Union from its storage space. It hummed in his palm, a blazing red inferno.

Simon stared at the red metal ball that Richard held before him. It spun in unhurried revolutions, spraying light the color of life's blood. A gift from the Tinker King, the Unman had called it, and Simon surmised it could only be a weapon. Perhaps one of the explosive devices the old madman was rumored to have created in his hellish workshop. Simon had never seen one, but he'd heard reports of their usage in the Battle of Spice Harbor. One device had destroyed an entire frigate. What would it do in the deteriorating confines of Blessed Spire?

He had no time to consider it. The Unman could engage the device at any moment. Simon Hollowmander reached into his soul and summoned every bit of his passion, his hope, his dearly won life magic, and hurled it at the bastard whelp with a triumphant wail.

The power of the ancients. The gift of dragons.

White fire.

Fire blazed in the Flesh King's throat, and Richard knew what was coming next. He dived away from the blistering light that erupted from the old man's mouth. But Simon's attack was so quick, Richard never had a chance to avoid it.

It wasn't pain he felt when the white fire melted away his legs, but a loss of functionality. Warning sensors screamed in his head as his torso fell to the floor; neural transmissions leaping from microchip to synapse, shutting down all unnecessary systems, relocating power to the still functioning sectors of his being. Not only was Richard the Tinker King's first metal and flesh hybrid, he was a new step in construct evolution. A process man.

And he was shutting down.

The Flesh King crossed the room, shaking and wheezing. He looked even more spent than he had before, but triumph gleamed in his wet eyes. He towered over Richard's broken body and scanned the floor as if searching for something.

"Where is the explosive?" he asked, kicking Richard in the chest. It was a useless attack; Richard was beyond pain. "Give it to me!"

The already brittle walls were now being devoured by a hungry white blaze, and the rising sun shone through huge gaps in the ceiling. The Flesh King did not seem to notice the destruction. His eyes locked on the Tinker King's gift.

"Give that to me," said Simon, attempting to wrestle it from Richard's grip. "Give it to me now and I'll let you live."

Richard produced the closest thing to a laugh he could manage. Then he reached out with his construct arm and drove his sharpened iron fingers into Simon Hollowmander's chest. The old man writhed as Richard felt about, searched, dug, and emerged with his sputtering heart. It thumped for several seconds in Richard's hand before losing its spirit. He dropped the useless organ to the floor and gazed into his father's eyes.

"For you, the gift of understanding," said Richard. He shoved The Union into the gaping hole so recently vacated by Simon's misguided heart. The sudden burst of heat told him The Union was doing its work—melding flesh with metal, probing the dying man's body with sentient feelers, remaking that which was broken and finding what spark of magic remained in his soul.

Richard the Remade had fulfilled his destiny. Soul to soul, heart to heart. The rest was up to fate.

He saw a look of wonderment cross his father's face before his ocular chip finally ceased to function. Blackness fell like a burial shroud, and he could no longer feel the warm flow of oil and blood pouring from his body, or the morning wind's chill as it swirled through the doomed building's walls. And he felt no fear when Blessed Spire gave one last gasp like a great dying beast, then collapsed into a ravaged heap of ancient stone. Richard heard nothing but a heartbeat, a strong, steady cadence that beckoned him to his reward.

A moment later, silence.

Shutdown.

The Flesh King was dead, but Simon Hollowmander was very much alive. He clawed his way from the rubble, tossing aside stone blocks with newfound strength, until at last he stood at the summit of the huge mountain of destruction that had been Blessed Spire.

Thin sheets of silver metal flowed across the surface of his skin, always in motion, and likewise his skin crawled from arm to leg to chest, neither element allowing the other an inch of dominance. The Tinker King's gift had done its job well. Simon Hollowmander was in perfect balance—the magic of the flesh and the machinations of science both alive in a single soul.

Simon felt strong. Alive.

"I am King Simon, First Lord of the Union," he said, raising his voice so that it carried to the far edges of the valley. Combatants from both sides fell to their knees in supplication: clockmen and dragons, steamers and undead soldiers, all manner of construct beast. And the same understanding that flowed through Simon's being flowed through theirs.

Heart to heart.

Soul to soul.

"The Brotherhood of the Flesh is dead," said Simon the Remade. "Long live the Brotherhood of the Union." ❧

the King of the Djinn

Perhaps one might wish to attract the attention of forces of the universe. Perhaps one might not.

BY BENJAMIN ROSENBAUM ILLUSTRATION BY BEN SOWARDS

Grinding and roaring, the sixteen-wheeler crested a great dune, and Musa rejoiced: there on the horizon, the Mediterranean glittered, blue as Heaven. "God is great!" he shouted as he shifted into second for the downgrade.

Each week, Musa made this trip, carrying a ton of devilish black carbonated soda from the bottling plant of El-Nasr to the decadent tongues of Cairo. And each week, when he reached the open road, his heart threw off its burdens.

In the town, the nights were empty and cold. He'd awaken again and again to the sudden emptiness of his house—his wife Suha dead, his son Jamal away at university. The days were full of packing and loading and tinkering, activity and worry. The men of the bottling plant were always asking Musa for blessings, for amulets, for the resolution of disputes. They'd found out, somehow, that he'd once studied Qur'an and Hadith in the great merkab in Cairo. Sometimes he even had the odd sense that they knew about his meetings with the King of the Djinn. He never knew what to say to them.

On the road, Musa was with God alone. He prayed without words as he drove, using only his breath, opening himself to God as the great bounty of the world came into focus. Every blinding white grain of sand reflected God's glory at Musa; the blue vault of the heavens was filled with God's breath. The roaring engine of the semi and the black ribbon of the highway testified to the great genius God had entrusted in man. Whenever Musa saw a camel or a goat or a date tree in the sand beyond the highway, it was full of life, full to bursting, and the life in it reached out into Musa's heart and whispered to him: we are one.

The King of the Djinn had been right. It was he who had told Musa to abandon the academy, that his soul was starving. Musa had given his inheritance to charity, dropped out of the merkab, and found this simple work. For forty years, he had devoted himself to the secret path of the breath. He slowed down enough for God to find him, and God took Musa in the palm of His hand and held him there. Even at Suha's death, God's love of Musa never wavered; Musa cried like a woman at her graveside, and God held him with strong arms and kept him safe from despair.

Now Musa could see tiny white flecks against the sea's blue. Whitecaps dancing. The road turned parallel to the shore.

As for the King of the Djinn: Musa was not sure, of course, that he really was the King of the Djinn. That was just a guess. He called himself "Gil."

But since 1952, when they had met in a café in the student quarter, Musa had become an old man, and Gil had not aged a day. Gil looked like a Persian, but he spoke a fluent and elegantly complex classical Arabic, the way no one had spoken it since the time of the Prophet. And in Gil's eyes, Musa saw the kind of fearlessness men had only when they were young and arrogant, or old and dying. Yet Gil possessed it all the time.

Given his instrumental role in turning Musa to the true knowledge of God, it was possible that Gil was an angel. But Gil did not act like an intimate of God's. Whenever he showed up, every few years, Gil would ask Musa to talk of his discoveries, hanging hungrily on every word. It was the hunger of an unmarried youth asking about sex, or a poor man asking about luxury. There was something that kept Gil from embracing God's presence, from accepting God's love as Musa did. For this, Musa pitied him. Even so, Gil also had a majesty about him, an admirable depth and power. To call him just a Djinn seemed meager. Surely he was the King of the Djinn.

When Musa's thoughts turned to Gil like this, it was often a sign that he would be visiting soon. Musa's heart beat happily at the thought. If he had a friend in this world, with Suha gone, it was Gil.

The motor coughed a particularly agonized cough, and Musa looked quickly at the temperature gauge. It was in the red. Musa had no clock; he used the motor's periodic overheating to time his daily prayers. He pulled the truck off the road into a patch of sand packed down by the tracks of many tires.

Musa sloshed the remaining water in his canteen skeptically. He had drunk too much that morning; there was not enough for drinking and purification both. He clambered out of the cab and, in the shadow of the truck, did the ablutions with sand. Then he performed the prayers. How it lifted his heart, to be one with the millions of the faithful, all yearning toward the city where God had spoken to his best and final prophet. Thus had God completed the work of filling the world with his bounty: air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat, people to love, and finally the gentle and firm rules and the great poetry and wisdom of the Word of God.

His prayers done, his motor still smoking, Musa sat cross-legged in the shadow of the truck, on the sand, and allowed his soul to rise.

His soul ascended and saw the sand and the date palms, the ribbon of highway and the truck, the sea and cliffs beyond. It swept higher and he saw the fertile valley of the Nile and the teeming cities and the ships and cars and airplanes.

His soul descended into Cairo and flew through the streets, yearning for his only son Jamal. It was a Tuesday, when his son had no classes at the university. He would probably be watching soccer and drinking coffee at his favorite café.

Musa's soul entered the café. But there was no laughter, no shouting and no urging on of players running after a ball. The men sat in silence. The room was choked in anger.

On the television, Zionists were committing their atrocities in the camps of Palestine. Tanks fired at young men. Bulldozers tore houses open. Old women, old men, and children ran bleeding through the devastated and smoking streets.

Musa's soul found Jamal sitting in the corner, his fist clenched around his coffee glass. Jamal was full of fury. *Why?* Jamal's heart cried. *How can we bear our weakness, how can we bear to see the innocents suffer!*

My son, Musa's soul called to him, *do not be taken by hopelessness. There are always evildoers in the world, as long as men are weak. Take heart, God is great—*

But Jamal's heart did not listen. It went on suffering and raging in its own misery and shame. *I sit here in Cairo,* it said, *studying engineering, while America buys bullets to kill the children of Palestine. While my father delivers America's soda pop! To earn the money with which I buy this coffee. We are all slaves!*

Musa's soul was struck as if his son had kicked him. It flew out of the café and out of Cairo, and back into his body where it sat by the road.

Musa prayed that his son would not be swept away by hatred and bitterness. As he prayed, his heart galloped like a horse, and he was aware of the thousands of bottles of Pepsi sitting in their crates in his truck, and he prayed that his son would not despise him.

At the sound of a car stopping, Musa opened his eyes. There, in the glare of the desert sun beyond the shadow of the truck, was the King of the Djinn getting out of a Jeep.

Musa got quickly to his feet. He bowed deeply in greeting.

The King of the Djinn walked into the shadow of the truck and bowed back. He was wearing a European-style suit and carrying a briefcase. Beneath his calm smile Musa could feel a great, empty yearning.

"It is good to see you," Musa said as they shook hands. He resisted the urge to embrace the King of the Djinn.

"And you."

Musa's heart was still thundering from his encounter with his son, and he was dizzy and sweating from the heat. He looked at the smile of the creature in the suit, and all of a sudden he found himself asking the question that was always on his tongue, but which he had told himself he would never ask. And so stupidly—he had not inquired as to the health of the other, had not offered him water or coffee or apologized for his inability to provide proper hospitality, had not told or heard any stories, had exchanged neither compliments nor proverbs. His stupid tongue simply jumped up and asked rudely: "Are you a Djinn?" Then he clapped his hands to his mouth in horror.

Gil grinned. As if he approved of the question, was proud of Musa for asking it. He squinted and pursed his lips as if deciding how to answer.

"I don't know what I am," he said finally. "But that is the best proposal I have heard so far."

Musa stood transfixed with embarrassment. He coughed and tried to think of what to say to return the conversation to its proper course.

"And since I am, for lack of a better word, a Djinn," said Gil, "I should offer you wishes."

"Oh no!" said Musa. "I could not accept!"

"Musa," said Gil, "our encounters have been valuable to me over the years. You deserve at least one wish. Would you like it for yourself, or for your son?"

"For my son!" gulped Musa. *Old fool!* he shouted at himself silently. *You did not even refuse three times!* And yet he was so worried about Jamal.

"Very well," said Gil, smiling and handing Musa the briefcase. "Here is what your son wants most in the world."

A chill went through Musa's hands. He set the briefcase down in the sand and looked at the latches. They were shiny and brass.

"Well?" said Gil.

Musa reached out with shaking hands to open the latches.

Most of the contents of the briefcase were covered with a cloth of fine dark silk. But on top of the silk was a blue plastic booklet with a picture of an eagle, and western letters on it. An American passport. Musa opened it. There was his son's picture. He looked up at Gil, confused. Was this what Jamal wanted? To go to America? Musa did not know what to think. There would be dangers, temptations—but at the same time Jamal would learn much, and perhaps—

Gil's eyes were sad—though Musa thought, again, that the sadness was on the surface, like a mask; that beneath it was emptiness—and he gestured back to the briefcase.

Musa looked down again. He moved aside the black cloth.

The rest of the briefcase was filled with thick yellow cylinders of something that looked like clay, connected with electrical tape and wires.

"No!" shouted Musa. "No!"

With that passport, Jamal could go through the border at Taba, into Israel. He could go to the busiest café, the most crowded corner in Tel Aviv, and murder himself and a hundred Zionists—Zionists in

baby carriages, Zionists in bridal gowns, Zionists with canes and false teeth—and join the Palestinian martyrs in their struggle.

But surely Jamal would never get through! He would be searched at the border. They would find the bomb, they would punish him! But the stillness in Gil's eyes told Musa that the King of the Djinn had granted far greater wishes, and that Jamal would not fail.

Musa prostrated himself at Gil's feet, burying his face in his hands. "No!" he cried. "Please! Please, sir—Gil—whatever you are—do not do this!"

"Musa, you have become complacent," Gil said. "You have a special gift, a special connection to God. But it is too easy for you. You drive your truck and have visions and take it for granted that it is enough. But God requires more. Sometimes God requires sacrifice."

Musa struggled to his feet, looked wildly around. "This isn't what God wants! Don't tell me God wants my only child martyred! To murder innocents along with the guilty, as the oppressors themselves do! Is that how the Prophet fought?"

"Musa," said Gil, and in his voice was an ancient, ancient cold, with ten thousand years of emptiness behind it, "there is nothing you can do about that. Here is what you can do."

Musa waited, watching Gil's bottomless, glittering eyes.

"Write an amulet," Gil said. "For the protection and redemption of your son's soul. If you think he is going into sin—write an amulet to protect him."

Musa wanted to protest more, to plead. But he found himself going to the cab of his truck and getting in, and taking his parchment and pens and ink out of the dashboard compartment. His tears mixed with the ink as he wrote the declaration of faith and he prayed, fervently, fervently. He no longer felt God's grace in every grain of sand. He felt as though God's grace was hidden at the end of a very long tunnel.

Gil came and took the amulet from him. "Thank you, Musa," he said, and walked to his jeep and got in.

Musa started his motor. He would rush to Cairo, too, and talk to Jamal. He would persuade him of the wrongness of his actions. He released the clutch and eased onto the road as the Jeep pulled out ahead of him.

But Jamal would not listen. Musa could hear his arguments now. How else to strike at the powerful oppressor, he would say, but the only way we can? Could Musa say for certain he was wrong? *But not my son!* Musa's heart shouted. *God, God, not my only son!* Jamal would look at him with contempt. Driver of sodas.

The road began a long, steep downgrade. Musa took his foot off the gas, lightly tapped the brake as he followed. The Jeep sped on ahead.

Jamal would not listen. He would be gone, and Musa's life would be empty. If Jamal could only get through this period of youth and fiery blood, if he could only learn patience and humility, learn to trust God and endure injustice ... but he would not have time. The briefcase in the Jeep ahead would see to that.

Help me, God, help me, Musa prayed, with all his heart.

Was it God? Or was it His Adversary? Or simply desperation? Something took Musa's foot off the brake and slammed it down onto the gas and held it there.

The truck groaned and shuddered as it surged down the downgrade. It gained on the Jeep.

The distance closed.

Gil looked back over his shoulder, and in that instant Musa realized he loved the King of the Djinn as a dog loves his master, and he slammed on the brake. But the inertia of a ton of Pepsi would not entertain such indecision. The wheels of the cab locked and skidded, the trailer behind slammed it forward, and the nose of the semi smashed into the Jeep, flipping it into the air. Musa was thrown into the wheel; his jaw snapped and blood fountained across the windshield. He felt the truck fishtail off the road, and then roll; he heard the sound of ten thousand shattering Pepsi bottles fill the desert.

Then it stopped.

Then came the sound of ten thousand bottles slowly reassembling themselves.

The droplets of blood swam slowly back through the air into Musa's veins.

The glass of the windshield reassembled, each piece flying silently, gracefully, back to meet its brothers, glinting in the sunlight. Behind them, the sky rolled back to its proper place above Musa.

The Jeep swung down out of the sky, kissed the cab of the truck, and moved forward onto the road. The trailer of the rig drew back and the cab settled down. Musa's foot left the brake and landed on the gas.

Musa had never known what a gift the gentle movement of time was, the succession of each moment in its turn, each moment a wide open field of freedom and of choice. He felt his heart beat backward, his breath move backward through his lungs. He wanted to shout, to cry, to escape the cab, but he could not: his limbs moved in their predetermined course as the Jeep and the truck crept backward up the hill. Slowly, time dragged its Musa puppet back through the seconds, until he was in his cab parked at the side of the road handing the amulet to Gil. Then it released him.

Gil gasped and spat into the sand. He was shaking. So was Musa. The King of the Djinn looked up at him with a wild, feral grin.

Musa gripped the wheel, his heart exploding in terror.

"You surprised me, Musa," Gil said. "I'm amazed. It's been a very long time since any of my collection surprised me." He looked out over the desert horizon. "I think I've had you on too loose a leash. Your talents make you too hard to control."

Musa had never known what a gift the gentle movement of time was, the succession of each moment in its turn, each moment a wide open field of freedom and of choice.

Musa watched this King of the Djinn in silent terror. This creature who played with time as a child plays with dolls. Was this Satan himself?

Gil glanced back and saw Musa's face, and for a moment the chill, benign mask of the King of the Djinn slipped, and Musa saw what was under it: desperate rage. Then Gil smiled coolly again.

"You're a fool, Musa. I'm not Time's master. I'm its victim."

He looked down at the amulet and stroked it once, gently. Then he slipped it into his pocket.

He threw the briefcase into the Jeep but did not get in. He stood and watched Musa. "Well," he said finally, "There's nothing you can do to save Jamal. And you won't see me again. So all your earthly attachments are gone now, Musa. You're free to find God." Gil pointed out into the empty desert. "He's that way."

Musa looked in the direction the Djinn had pointed.

God's presence was everywhere, in every grain of sand. It was the same huge, infinite, bountiful light.

But how could he have misjudged it before, to think it gentle? It was alien, inhuman, immense beyond reason. If every human was burned alive, if every creature on earth was swallowed in the fire, the Divine Presence would not blink.

Musa began to walk.

He walked until his throat was dry and his breathing shallow. Then, after a while, he was crawling. It was only a spiritual exercise.

The sand was hot against his cheek.

The Sahara was a vast white page, and Musa's body one tiny, bent black letter written on it. Seen from above, seen from very far away. ❧

» Someone's trying to tell you something important.

» You'd better listen carefully.

» It may be your last chance.

HOBNOBLIN BLUES

BY ELIZABETH BEAR

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVE LERI

TRACKS: How do you define yourself?

LOKI: I don't. (laughter) Fuck, why do you people always ask me that?

There's always a secret history, stories that remain unreported, tales too ticklish to tell. No matter how many soul-and-skin-baring biographies are writ, no matter how many groupies sell their stories to *The Midnight Sun*.

It's a source of intense frustration to the press that more—don't.

Something about Loki makes people keep secrets. Not just his lovers (the ephemeral ones or the few that linger over more than breakfast). Even the interviewers do it, as if they need to hoard clandestine fragments to gloat over.

You do it, too.

But you have more to work with. You know his real name isn't that stupid collection of nonsense syllables. And you know he doesn't come from here.

When he fell, you fell with him.

Not for rebellion, but for love.

***Monster Bones*, the second album by controversial British songwriter** Loki, looks to be a major breakout. The nine tracks, unified by themes of loss and catastrophe, range from "Golden Apples," a meditation on mortality—the apples hold the secret of eternal life, but like Sleeping Beauty's are poisoned—to the epic, Zeppelinesque crunch of "Bad Water," while the title track—a transparent commentary on the likely eventual legacy of the Vietnam conflict—uses crisp guitar and a killer bassline to underscore the point of view of a giant-killer revisiting the resting place of the adversary that crippled him: *Prone under a forked white sky / I stare up a roof of bones / Bake under a crucified sun.*

THE SECOND ALBUM
ACCLAIMED BRITISH ROCKER
2002
MON
NES
CAN TOUR
WEDNESDAY
CLOSED
CALL STEPHAN
207-34

For a rock-and-roll singer, Loki demonstrates an astonishing vocal range. It's surprising to learn that he has no classical training, because the overall impression of his soaring performance is something like a Carole King with balls. With *Monster Bones,* Loki takes a hard look at the blues, and dumps it on its ass to take up with rock n' roll. A brilliant departure.

Loki says, laughing, "Look at this nonsense, Hob. They can't even get their own fairy tales right."

You pull the flimsy magazine from his hand, already folded to the important page. Loki is paying more attention to the pretty redheaded boy nuzzling his neck.

Later, on the title track of a 1983 release, Loki will revisit those lyrics, in a song that most people will assume is about cocaine addiction.

People, you will both have learned by then, will almost always assume.

The cancer, he'll sing, in the wailing apocalyptic style that's just a crippled echo of his true voice, *speaks with a forked white tongue. The cancer croons with a forked white tongue.*

He was born Martin Trevor Blandsford in Manchester, UK, in 1950, where he attended grammar and vocational schools. In 1966, he dropped out, ran off to London, and in the company of three other young men took a famously squalid two-room flat in Soho.

There was nothing to indicate that within six years, Martin Blandsford would be transformed into a rock-and-roll avatar.

He craved shock, but for years it must have seemed he was born just a little too late. His mid-seventies revelations of drug abuse, bisexuality, and financial mismanagement failed to adequately galvanize a press already inured to the excesses of performers such as Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie, Janis Joplin, and the Rolling Stones.

The fulfillment of Loki's desire to set the music establishment on its heels—or on its ear—would have to wait until 1980. When he'd do just that, in the most spectacular manner possible.

ROBBIN HOWARD "HOBNOBLIN" JUST: 7 July 1950—
INSTRUMENTS: saxophone, mandolin, keyboards, rhythm guitar. Backing vocals.

A respected and steady-handed session musician, most noted for his work with **Loki.** Just was one of two members of the legendary 1970s touring band to continue performing with the singer after his 1980-1981 transformation (the other was bassist **Ramona Henkman**). He continued to record and travel with Loki until 2004, when the androgynous rocker put himself, Just—and the entire music industry—out of a job.

Loki purses his lips, sips Irish coffee, and lifts the back-folded newspaper in his left hand. He reads over the tops of his sunglasses. "Seven months ago, when Loki toured in support of *Monster Bones,* he and his five-man backing band shattered attendance records—and possibly a few eardrums. Ranting, charismatic, with an indefatigable stage presence, the tall black-haired rock God bestrode the stage—and the microphone stand—like a modern titan."

But the flesh around his lips is taut. Fine furrows lead from his nose to the corners of his mouth. You wince in anticipation.

He doesn't disappoint. The paper crumples in his hand, ink smearing under his thumb. "Titan. *Titan.* Wankers. Can't even tell the difference between a giant's son and a goddamned pansy titan. Do you believe this rubbish?"

"At least they're not making any misinformed cracks about fire gods," you say, eyes on your eggs.

It's unwise to provoke him. But sometimes irresistible.

He snorts, and hunches down to the paper again. His hair falls over his eyes. He shoves it back with a gaunt hand, sniffling. He sniffles constantly.

It's the cocaine. The gauntness is that. plus amphetamines. He takes them when he works, in heroic quantities, as if they could replace the forbidden mead of poetry.

Loki never knew when to shut up. Which is both why he's here, and why you followed him down.

He drinks more coffee and continues reading. "But the tour for the follow-up album *Barbed Hearts* is little more than bloated indulgence, the raw edges of the rock and roll buried under a stage show whose self-importance might give pause to Blue Öyster Cult. Dear Mr. Loki, a message from your loyal fans: lasers and lipstick are not the markers of a brilliant career. Bah!"

He smacks the paper down on the table, splashing your tea, and finishes his whiskey-laced coffee. One of the staff is at his elbow in a moment with the pot, and—always polite—he remembers to thank her. It's as reflexive as the thanks he offers when you pass him the silver flask kept warm inside your gaudy velvet waistcoat.

You could refuse. But that wouldn't stop him drinking, and he'd be even worse in a rage. You pass him the whipped cream too.

At least it's calories.

"Fuck 'em," you say. The reek of alcohol from his coffee stings your nostrils. You pick a flake of skin beside your nail.

These bodies. There's always something going wrong. Exile is a kind word for *death sentence.* Nobody likes spilling the blood of a god if they can help it.

Bad precedent.

"You should see what they say about your sax, sweetheart." He finger-flicks the paper away. "Gods *rot* it, Hobnoblin. I want to go home."

He doesn't mean England. You don't mean England either when you say, softly, "Yeah," and reach over and pat his hand.

He shakes it off, though, and jerks his head side to side, sniffing. "Well, as long as we're stuck here, maybe we can bust things up a little. Let in some damned light and air."

It never worked on the Aesir, but you don't say that. It won't help either of you to remind him that he provoked the exile he mourns. Loki has never been any good at all at keeping his head down.

You're a little too good at it. That's one of the reasons why you love him: when the Aesir came, Loki was the one who would not be silenced, who forced them to treat with him as an equal.

For a time.

But that's a second thing you can't say. And the third one you don't tell him is that, despite the coffee mug, his fingers are chill.

TRACKS: Would you rather talk about the music? How much of the process is collaborative?
LOKI: Oh, let's. And—frankly—a lot! I mean, the songs are mine, but the arrangements, that's all of us. And that's most of what makes it work. The Hobnoblin [Robbin "Hobnoblin" Just is Loki's saxophone player—ed.] has a great ear for layering sounds. (Loki laughs and takes a drag on his cigarette, holding the smoke while he finishes the thought.) And a good bass player, that holds the whole thing together. We hired this chick you're gonna love. (Smirking.) Oh, it's all collaboration. I'm pretending modesty this week. I just write the pretty words and play a little lousy guitar.

He drifts on the music sometimes. The sound system in the estate in Kent is extraordinary, and sometimes you'll walk out on the patio and find Loki in jeans and a T-shirt, arms spread wide, head lolled back, letting the music lift him like a thermal lifts a hawk.

It's not his own stuff he plays to go there. As often as not, it's not even rock. Beethoven; Mozart; Charlie Parker; Thelonious Monk; Bessie Smith; Big Mama Thornton; Joni Mitchell; Crosby, Stills, and Nash.

You won't disturb him while he's listening.

But sometimes you'll sit at the breakfast table and watch.

Word gets around.

I knew when I arranged the interview that Martin Blandsford—Loki, to his young fans—would rather be interviewed at home. He doesn't go out much. He's been assaulted by feral packs of adolescent mae-

nads one time too many, and says self-deprecatingly that it's in the interest of everyone's safety if he stays home with his slippers on.

Not that he was wearing slippers when I arrived. His bare knobby feet looked cold on the tile floor of his half-furnished house, and his white summer-weight pants were rolled up to show equally knobby ankles. He wore no shirt over his sinewy, hairless chest. His shaggy black hair stuck to itself in streaks of blue and goldenrod.

He'd been painting the upstairs bedroom, he explained.

To this reporter, accustomed to his commanding stage presence—the black leather and platform boots and smeared eyeliner—he seemed younger in person, slight, polite, dangerously thin. But the lack of costume bulk did make him appear even taller. He offered me a glass of wine and a cup of coffee, took one of each himself, and showed me into his den.

The actual interview did not go as smoothly.

MELODY MONITOR: Do you categorize yourself as feminine?
LOKI: Oh, no. I'm très butch. Don't you think?

The rest of the *Barbed Hearts* tour is a kind of hell, though you manage to tempt him sometimes with chocolate milk and yellow apples dipped in honey. Everybody in and around the band--the road manager, the guys from the record companies—assumes you are Loki's loyal and long-suffering lover, and you are treated with equal parts pity and disdain.

They expect you to play his keeper.

So you do.

He's worse at home, where it's just the two of you and whatever girl or boy (or girls, or boys) he's collected.

He doesn't eat for days. He hates the human food, the life-or-death choice. You're not immortal anymore, not without Iduna's stolen apples, and you're prey to all the needs and ills the flesh is heir to. Feed yourself, and live, and with it acknowledge that you are bound unto death in this mortal realm.

Well, that, and cocaine kills your appetite.

He stays up for four days writing songs for an album that never does get cut, because he pitches the whole lot into the woodstove one night when you're out by the pasture, feeding perfectly unmagicked apples to the perfectly unmagical horses, bays and duns and chestnuts and grays whose hides do not shine like faceted jewels, like beaten gold and steel and silver.

He never rides. You think perhaps he keeps them around to make himself sad.

Before the next tour, he wants to reinvent himself.

You sit behind him and chat and hand him the comb and scissors while he cuts his hair in front of the mirror. You help him bleach it white-blond, and once he's rinsed off the searing chemicals, the pair of you drink champagne and eat peaches and watch this month's crop of girls splash in the pool.

You kid yourself it might keep getting better.

But by month's end, you've packed for the new tour, painfully titled *Ragnarock-and-Roll*. It's soon apparent that the "fresh start" has been only a moment of reprieve.

Loki has always been thin, but the drugs and anorexia whittle him to bone and wire. He suffers hallucinations and fits of cocaine paranoia. He has a houngan brought in to exorcise the drum kit, because you can't trust those damned Norns.

Okay, that one is almost reasonable.

At his worst, he weighs one hundred and seven pounds at six foot two, and won't wear his earplugs on stage because he feels them squirming. He keeps singing, though, even if nobody can hear him. Because what he has to say is important, even if it's doomed to go unheard. What worries you most is what will happen if he forgets himself enough to raise his voice—because he could make people listen. He *could*.

If he were willing to pay the price.

He's a dying man clutching a microphone, and it's an ugly thing.

MELODY MONITOR: Seriously, your sexuality's been an open question for years—
LOKI: My sexuality is an answered question. But apparently nobody likes the answer. I am what I am. Musically, personally. I don't like categories. I'm not going to assign myself to one.

It's boring to repeat myself.

"Wankers," he says, with that polite measured quietness. He drops a copy of *Rolling Stone* on the floor and kicks it under the table. It skitters, pages fluttering, and fetches against the leg of your chair. You butter a scone. "Loki hasn't got a damned thing to do with fire. That's Surtr, for fuck's sake. I swear they do it just to piss me off. It's a goddamned conspiracy."

You break the scone and lay the larger portion on Loki's empty plate.

He sniffles and ignores it. "They called me 'a Ziggy Stardust-influenced Elvis impersonator.' Bunch of ignorant fuckers in the press."

"Yeah," you say.

He's not even drinking the coffee anymore.

SINGER COLLAPSES ON STAGE

British pop idol Loki collapsed during a concert last night at the Tingley Coliseum in Albuquerque, NM. The performer, 26, has been hospitalized for exhaustion. Presbyterian Hospital reports that he is in stable condition, receiving intravenous fluids, and in no immediate danger.

Band member Robbin "Hob" Just issued a public statement early this morning, blaming Loki's illness on fatigue and "dieting prior to a photo shoot."

He also said, "[The weather] is never this beastly in London. It's hard on the whole band."

Temperatures remained in the triple digits throughout the night, and attendance at last night's performance was estimated at over 11,500.

Tonight's show has been postponed. Changes to any further tour dates have not been announced.

Loki is known for shocking stage antics and provocative lyrics. But his most recent album failed to chart a single, and the current tour has failed to sell out arena venues in seven states.

While he's in the hospital, you clean out his stash. There'll be Hell to pay when he gets back, and you've no illusions you can keep him straight for long. But he'll be straight when they let him out, and he might still be straight long enough to yell at, if the pills and cocaine are gone.

Of course, he can get more. There are *always* people around who will get it for him.

But Ramona, the bass player, catches you going through the trunks and suitcases.

Silently, she helps you flush the pills.

MELODY MONITOR: Would you say you go out of your way to make yourself seem unusual?
LOKI: D'you know about left-hander syndrome? No? Left-handed people make up around thirteen percent of the population. About the same percentage as homosexuals, give or take. And left-handed people die, depending on who you listen to, two or nine years earlier than right-handed people.

This might be because of accidents caused by bleedin' navigating through a right-handed world.

Being different can kill you, can't it?
MELODY MONITOR: Are you left-handed?
LOKI: I'm ambidextrous. As in so many things.

He breaks his hand when he hits you.

Actually, he was swinging at Ramona, but you step in front of it and take the punch on the side of the head, to nobody's lingering

pleasure. He's taller than you by a good ten inches, but frail from starvation and speed, and the swing that barely turns your head lands him, flailing, on his ass, all spiky elbows and knees.

He sits there, spraddle-legged as a colt in black leather and heavy boots, his T-shirt untucked at the waist, and shifts his gaze from the hand he clutches, to your face, and back again.

Ramona steps forward. You stand your ground, the same way you stood it beside him when the Aesir handed the sentence down and the rest of the dvergar stepped away.

You wonder if he can read the memory in your face, or if he has one of his own. He doesn't get up. He doesn't look down.

"Hob, can you get me into a program?" he says.

In 1977, the punk zine *Beat Down* proclaimed of *The Esoteric Adventures of Kittie Calamatie*, "What the fuck is this? It sounds like Frank Zappa mating with an alley cat. Who told this bloated arena rock asshole that he should ditch the laser show and synthesizers? And what's with the fucking mandolin? And *why do I like it?*"

It marked a new creative era for Loki, a regeneration of the innovative, questing spirit of the early 1970s. The album and subsequent tour, in which he assumed the persona of a drag queen punk rocker—the eponymous Kittie Calamatie—rejuvenated interest in his work, and the album reached #5 on the UK charts and #3 in the U.S.

Loki was sober and pissed off again, and the result was beautiful music.

"Oh, fuck me running," Loki moans, head down in his hands, his hair—black again—standing in spikes between his fingers. There's a newspaper open on the table, dented by his elbows; you have come to know it as a sign of dread warning.

"What is it this time?"

Wordlessly, he leans back and rotates the paper with a fingertip. You shuffle forward, slippers scuffing on the tile, and clutch your bathrobe closed over your chest. There's a photo from a recent gig on page five. You're not in it, but Ramona and Loki are leaned together, jamming, guitar and bass necks bobbing in time. "It's a rave," you say, scanning the review.

"Look at my face."

You stare; it looks like Loki. Both the photo and the man sitting in front of you, idly turning his orange juice glass around inside its ring of condensate.

"I'm not getting any younger," he says, when you blink at him stupidly.

"Oh," you say, and sit down in the other chair. "Right. Happy birthday."

IF ANYBODY GETS ANYTHING FROM MY LIFE, I HOPE IT'S THAT THE REAL FREAKS ARE THE ONES WHO TRY TO PROGRAM AND CONDITION EVERYBODY TO CONFORM TO A CONQUEROR'S CULTURE.

He tosses the wing of black hair out of his eyes. He's wearing a shaggy long-fronted punk cut, streaked purple and indigo, these days. It changes without notice, like the music on the stereo.

"It's not working," he says.

"Of course it's not working." You pour coffee from the thermal carafe, add cream, two lumps of sugar with the tongs. So civilized these days. There's only his cereal spoon on the table, so you swipe it and stir. "What did you expect?"

"I thought I could make them understand," he says. "But it's all I can do to keep their attention."

"Some of it gets through. Subliminally." The coffee is delicious, hot enough that for a moment you forget the cold of the world. You pour a second cup. "Change takes time."

Fretfully, he picks the skin at the back of his hand. It snaps down, taut, but you know what he's imagining. "I haven't got time."

You don't answer.

"What if I showed them?" he says, conversationally, ten minutes later.

It's a tone you know not to trust. "Showed them what?"

He shrugs. "How silly the categories are. I got Thor into a wig and dress. Surely I can inject a little chaos into a complacent, self-consumptive media culture. I mean, Reagan's president-elect. Iron Maggie. .. don't even get me started on her. It's like the counterculture never happened. So ... what if I turned into a girl?"

You're trained, by now. You don't let him see you choke on the scalding coffee. "It's not like turning yourself into a mare by magic, Jotunsson."

He tweaks skin between nails again. "It's only meat. What's the difference? It's just meat. It's dying anyway."

By the last days of 1980, John Bonham and Keith Moon are dead, Mick Jagger is divorced, David Bowie is sober, and Loki has finally pulled off a stunt that defies comparison.

LOKI: You wankers—and when I say you wankers, I mean the press, Bob—never let go of anything. You take it all out of context. When I started reassignment, you should have seen reporters trying to come up with coded ways to ask me if I'd had my pizzle cut off yet.

It's all a fucking hype machine. You say something like, rock and roll, it's the devil's music, it's concerned with subversion and revolution and kicking back at authority, and the headline the next day is "Loki Declares Self Lucifer!"

BADGER: Well, that'll certainly be my headline.

Smoke wreathes her face as she studies me. I can see the moment when she decides it's funny after all, and gives a weak laugh.

LOKI: Don't be silly, I hate fire. Ask me about the drugs, why don't you?

BADGER: What about the drugs?

LOKI: Don't ever fucking get started. And if you are started, stop right now. I'm not a role model, and you don't want to be like me.

BADGER: Like you? Famous, talented, respected? Or like you, a freak?

LOKI: Oh, the freak part is fine. That's a scream. If anybody gets anything from my life, I hope it's that the real freaks are the ones who try to program and condition everybody to conform to a conqueror's culture.

But I'd rather nobody emulated the drug abuse. You should see the films from my last nasal endoscopy. Not pretty.

Of course, the way it works is people want to idolize rock stars, pretend these stage personas are gods. They want to make rock star mistakes, but they're so busy pretending we're immortal and special that they don't want to learn from those mistakes. Live big, die gagging on their own vomit.

All these lovely illustrations of perfectly asinine behavior, and people want to be just like them. Same thing you people have always done with gods.

BADGER: You people?

LOKI: I'm an atheist. And you know, I could *make* people listen. But it'd be the last thing they ever heard.

In 1980, when Loki revealed his plans to become a woman, the announcement was greeted by a jaded media first with derision and then disbelief [needs cite(s)]. While the singer had long been open about his bisexuality, his confession that he had entered treatment for Gender Identity Disorder and decided to undergo sex reassignment surgery was treated as a publicity stunt.

In 1983, *Badger* published a nude photo layout of Loki, post-op, provoking a media frenzy.

Loki walks around where you can see her, catches your eye with her upraised hands. "What are you doing, Hob?" she signs.

Your fingers lift from the keyboard. She watches intently. "Updating your Clikipedia entry."

"Packing it with lies, I hope."

"Do you want me to take out the bit where it says you're controversial in the trans community for refusal to politicize your sexuality?"

"Is that code for *I fuck people who aren't transfolk?*"

"I guess."

She sighs, swings the opposite chair around, throws a leg over it and plunks down. She straddles the back and leans forward on crossed arms. A moment later, she leans back. Her hands work jaggedly. "Even when they learn to listen," she says, "they still want to force you to say what they think you should be saying. Everybody wants the power of mind control. I just wanted to make them stop and *think*."

She stops talking. You let her sit motionless until she shakes herself and finishes, "Besides, I fuck transfolk too."

"Sweetie," you tell her (you never called her sweetie when she was a man), "you fuck anybody you think is sexy."

She grins, runs her tongue along her upper lip, and bats her eyelashes. "And what the hell is wrong with that?"

"Here," you sign, and wave her over. "You'll like this bit."

Since her retirement from music, Loki remains a controversial and public figure. Her refusal to conform to political or social ideology has been described as anarchistic by some; however, the maverick ideology has been embraced by youth culture, some of whom describe her as a messiah.

"Fuck, Hobnoblin, you wanker," she says. "Take out that word, messiah. And this bit in the quotes, 'Half of what I say is meaningless, but I say it so you'll hear the other half.' That's me misquoting John Lennon misquoting Kahlil Gibran. Take that out."

"Consider it done. You know you're not supposed to edit your own entry."

She laughs and kisses you on the head. "You're editing it, not me. I like this bit though— 'The real freaks are the ones who try to program and condition everybody to conform to a conqueror's culture.' Did I say that?"

"In 1982."

The stars crack in the cold.
The only messenger is you.
Ride on
Killing horses.

GROOVECUTTER: How would you categorize what you do?
LOKI: I leave that to the critics. They have time.
MELODY MONITOR: You must get asked about your surgery a great deal, and what influenced your decision. Before your gender reassignment, you were very open about your relationships—
LOKI: Relationships. There's a juiceless euphemism.
MELODY MONITOR: How has your gender reassignment changed things?
LOKI: [inaudible]
MELODY MONITOR: Could you repeat that?
LOKI: I said, should it have?

The media still depresses her. The mortal world is both too subjective and not fluid enough. She doesn't read the papers anymore, or the biographies, or watch the tell-all exposés. She's aging. You both are.

The exile is a death sentence, too.

It's not as if anything mere humans could devise would shock her, who knew the treachery of the Aesir overlords. But thirty-odd years of this nonsense isn't enough to make either of you used to it, or resigned.

People, it seems, still assume you're fucking her. And some people still don't approve.

She paces your hospital room, fuming, hands balled in the small of her back. You're fine, you assure her. Loosened teeth, a cracked cheekbone, a couple of busted ribs. A few nasty names can't hurt you now, and the MPA are treating it as a hate crime. They take those seriously.

And you're alive. Mostly unbroken.

It could have been worse.

It doesn't seem to be a good time to remind her that she once hit you herself, when she was he, and you and Ramona flushed his cocaine.

"Don't hold back," you tell her, when her silence grates too harshly. The IV pinches in the back of your hand. The tape itches. "Tell us how you really feel."

She checks and turns to you, and her hands fall down by her sides. "I could. What if I did? What if I *made* them listen?"

"Loki, you're mortal now too. And so am I."

"I would miss the music," she admits. But shakes her head and continues, dark eyes narrowing under the black fringe of her bangs. "If you tell me not to, I won't do it."

As the world now knows, the purported Martin Trevor Blandsford was revealed on 24 February 2004 to be a supernatural being, bearing a message of peace and open-mindedness that had gone too long unheard. [disputed] Through the divine auspices of the heavenly messenger Loki, it was demonstrated unequivocally that "There are none so deaf as will not hear." [disputed; cite needed].

THE PATUCK READER: What do you think about the furor surrounding your last concert? What some are calling, in fact, The Last Concert.
LOKI: That's melodrama. There are babies born every day, and thousands of years of musical history for them to grow into. I certainly haven't stopped composing, and I don't imagine anybody else has. Beethoven can always serve as a good example.
THE PATUCK READER: You were jailed, there are death threats ...
LOKI: Let 'em come.
THE PATUCK READER: You've been called a visionary, or accused of suffering a messiah complex. You're often assigned credit or blame for social changes in the last thirty years. For example, the advancing debate over what people are calling nontraditional marriage rights—domestic partnership regardless of gender or number of partners. Do you deserve any of it?
LOKI: Don't be ridiculous. There's nothing visionary about anything I've said. Whatever you've done, you've done for yourselves. All I did was show you how to stop listening to the program and think. All I did was show people how to stop listening to the lies.

(She laughs.) If I were a messiah, I would be upset that more people don't agree with me.

The last album is released early in 2004. The *Let Silence Ring* tour kicks off the same day, with a worldwide live-televised gig from Madison Square Garden.

The encore is "Ride On." No great surprise there: it's the only reason it wouldn't have been in the regular set. You feel bad for Ramona; she doesn't deserve what's coming.

But as you walk back out to retake your places, you pick your earplugs out and flick them into the darkness at the side of the stage.

For luck.

Once upon a time, Loki could sing gold from a dwarf, love from a goddess, troth from a giantess. He bargained kidnapped goddesses away from giant captors and blood-brotherhood from the All-Father. He talked Thor into a dress, and nearly into a marriage.

She's never used the full strength of her voice to mortals before. When she does, it reaches every corner of the world, a high windblown cry of truth and chaos.

It's the last sound any of us hear. ❧

and SPARE not the FLOCK

Priests have flocks. Wolves have packs. How much difference is there, really?

BY MARGARET RONALD ILLUSTRATION BY KIRIKO MOTH

Cormac snuck into a church on the third night of his journey, in hopes that it would keep the wolf away. He hated himself for creeping in like a thief, and more so when he remembered his own church, unguarded and untenanted.

"It's not yours anymore," he said aloud, and started at the sound of his voice.

This church was smaller than his, and darker; the thin slits of windows let in only enough evening light to illuminate the rough wooden cross on the altar. Cormac touched the cross on his breast and knelt to pray—for the bishop, for the flock he'd left behind, but most of all for a night without wolves.

It was not to be. No sooner had his eyes closed than the grove rose before him, and the two wolves waited for him within. Dreaming, he tried to back away, but the wounded wolf coughed and shuddered, its skin peeling back to reveal human flesh beneath, the old woman's face twisted with pain. And again the hope in her eyes caught at him, kept him from leaving.

In the dream, the bishop was with him, discussing the Arian heresy in Latin that Cormac couldn't understand, and his grandmother was there as well, prompting him when he forgot the words. Dream-stuff; foolishness. But the other wolf never changed, no matter how many times he dreamed. It watched him with golden, angry eyes, its heavy scent enveloping him until he couldn't breathe.

He jerked upright and awake, the reek of damp fur still thick in the back of his throat. The church was dark as a grave, save for spindly bars of moonlight on the floor—and the gleam of yellow eyes.

"You," he said, and the wolf paced closer, its pelt gleaming silver where the moonlight crossed it. "You, again. Why?"

The wolf didn't answer. It hadn't spoken since that first night, two weeks ago.

"I should have known the cross wouldn't keep you away. She didn't have any fear of it, why should you?" If it was planning to kill him, he was a dead man already. His little knife was meant for eating, not fighting, and he had no skill with it. "I dreamed of you." He slumped against the altar. *Libera nos a malo,* he thought; *Lord, deliver us ...*

The wolf settled onto its haunches, still gazing at him.

"Why are you following me?" No answer, and he shook his head, banging it against the poorly cut stone. "Why even find me in the first place—you've got to have greater souls to corrupt."

It shook its head in an almost human gesture, but made no sound.

"I wish you hadn't—I wish I'd never given that woman last rites." The echo fell flat, and he bowed his head, remembering the old woman's look of relief as she saw the cross he wore. "No," he murmured. "No, I can't be sorry for it." *Even though what I did exiled me,* he thought. *Even though it has cost me my flock.*

The wolf's earlier silence was a howl compared to this. It got to its feet and stalked away, disappearing at last into the greater shadow of the doorway. Cormac waited, but it did not return. Eventually he slept, but the gray shapes running through the corners of his dreams told him he was not alone.

He woke before dawn and knelt again before the altar, murmuring his orisons until his voice was hoarse. A light touch on his shoulder interrupted him, and Cormac looked up to see a gray-haired man in black robes. "I didn't know anyone was in the church," said the priest. "It's a cold place; you would have been welcome with me."

"I came in late," Cormac said. "I didn't want to wake anyone." He got to his feet.

The priest glanced at Cormac's cross. "One of us, are you? That's good. You're a little young for it, though."

"I'm older than I look, Father. There were boys younger than I taking their vows when last I heard from Tara; and all have better Latin than I, I'd wager."

The priest laughed. "That's a truth, and it changes not with age. Will you break your fast with me?"

"I wish I could," Cormac said, and forced down the knowledge of his falsehood. The longer he stayed in this church, the more envious he grew and the worse his own loss stung. "But I'm carrying a message, and can't stay."

"Ah. Well, be careful on the roads. The Lochlainn haven't ceased raiding the coasts, and I hear they've even begun to settle."

"I'll try to stay clear of them." Cormac checked the packet of letters again and tried to move past him.

The priest caught his arm. "There's worse than Lochlainn," he whispered. "Brigands, and—well, I'd not say, but since you're ordained ... there's word of conriochtai."

Cormac stared at the door as if new words had written themselves into the oak. "Conriochtai. Men who walk as wolves."

"Or wolves who walk as men, who knows? But I've heard tales; even those of whole villages under such a curse." Cormac shook his head, and the priest leaned closer. "It's said they joy in confounding those in holy orders. Even Scripture speaks of it: 'Savage wolves will enter in among you and not spare the flock.'"

Does word travel so fast, then? Cormac smiled tightly. "I think that verse speaks of other things. But I'll be wary," he said, and pushed the door open. The priest gaped after him, but Cormac did not turn back.

He made good time on the second day, despite a thin drizzle that soaked through to his skin. A few travelers passed him, all going the other way. Many gave him suspicious, covetous looks; these were men who'd lost all they had and would seek to regain what they had lost, through brigandry if no other way presented itself. Cormac pulled his hood up and tried to appear poorer. The wind now smelled of saltwater; another day and he'd reach the port. Maybe a ship could take him at least as far as Britannia, if not farther.

All day, his neck prickled with the awareness of being watched. By now he was resigned to it; it was a minor discomfort compared to the cold, empty place inside him, where once a steady light had burned. But that light had gone out when his parishioners had turned away from him.

He said his evening prayers after the drizzle stopped and bedded down under a pine tree. The woods were dark, but no more than the church had been, and here at least the ground was softer than flagstones.

A gray shape coalesced out of the shadows, carrying something limp and furry in its mouth. After a baleful glare, it tossed its prey at his feet: a hare, its spine broken. He picked it up by its hind legs as the wolf returned with a second one and set about devouring it. "Thank you," Cormac said dubiously.

The hare was tough, poorly skinned, and burnt where he'd forgotten to turn it in time, but it was still better fare than he'd expected to have. The wolf ate its offal like a dog going after scraps.

No, he thought, returning the wolf's gold stare. *Not like a dog at all.*

He spread his cloak near the fire in hopes that it might dry out, then checked the letters again and closed the pouch with a sigh. The wolf gave him an odd look, then glanced away, its ears twitching. It stared into the darkness, the lines of its body so tense they might have been carved in stone. "What is it?" he asked, expecting no response.

The wolf flicked an ear at him, then abruptly snatched his cloak from the grass and darted away into the night.

"No!" Cormac leapt up. "Give me that!" He ran into the woods after it, his robe catching on every twig. The cloak was new, a replacement for the one he'd left covering the old woman's body, and he wasn't about to lose two cloaks to the same demon. He stumbled over a briar and bit back a curse.

> She's Lochlainn, he thought; she's a conriocht, a varg, and she could kill you without a second thought. Don't think of her as a woman.

Then he heard it: the guttural talk and laughter, thick with the accent of the Lochlainn. He hurried back to the fire to put it out, but too late: dark shapes blocked his path, reeking of grease and rust.

"Hvat er?" growled one of the men. "Er prestr! Ha!"

Cormac stumbled back, pressing the letters to him, but the Lochlainn already had his axe out. Its blade shone red in the firelight, and the huge man grinned.

And then a snarl rattled the leaves, so furious it froze Cormac's veins. The Lochlainn paused, long enough for a shape to leap between them. A shape—

—the wolf, he thought, *with his cloak clumsily looped over it—*

—but it twisted in mid-air with a ripping sound, like cloth tearing free of frost, and instead of landing on all fours it landed on two—

A bone-thin girl, no older than he, rose to her feet. With one hand she clutched his cloak around her. The other she held out in a gesture of forbidding. She spat—no, snarled, he realized, since it was no less a snarl even if she wore human shape—a stream of words in the Lochlainn tongue.

The tall Lochlainn bared his teeth in shock. "Varg?"

"You?" Cormac couldn't help saying.

The girl cast a furious glance at him. "Be quiet."

One of the Lochlainn put his hand on his sword, but another caught his arm, repeating the word "varg." To Cormac's amazement, they cowered away from her, though most were twice her size and all heavily armed. The girl glowered, and he could hear the growl in that look.

The leader of the Lochlainn, or at least the one with the axe, said something to which the girl replied in a torrent of harsh words. Whatever she said, it seemed to satisfy him, and he lowered his axe, tapping by his left eye in a heathen oath.

A tension that Cormac hadn't realized was there went out of the other Lochlainn, and they turned away, clapping each other on the back. The girl sighed and adjusted his cloak so it covered her more fully. "He says we're to come with them," she said. "I've told them you're my brother."

"They'll never believe that."

She gazed at him through her stringy yellow hair. "They might not. But they won't cross a varg."

"You—the Lochlainn—"

"Not Lochlainn. Gauti. I'm Scylding, but they'll listen to me because I'm a varg."

The biggest Lochlainn looked back at Cormac with a wicked grin, then turned and began belting out a coarse string of words that was probably meant as a song. The others chuckled, nodding to Cormac.

"He's singing about killing a priest," the girl said.

"Ah," said Cormac. His stomach turned over, and he straightened his shoulders, one hand on his cross. "His voice isn't really suited for singing, is it?"

The girl made a quiet "hm" of amusement, then raised her head and called something to the Lochlainn. The singer stopped, and the other men burst out laughing.

"You told him what I said?" Cormac whispered, horrified.

"Why not? It's true."

The ugly singer roared back at her, but he was grinning. He added something more, and the girl frowned. "He says we're to stay with them for the night. They don't trust me not to hunt them."

"Would you?"

She shrugged, and it was clear that was all the answer he would get.

The Lochlainn settlement was no more than a few tents and the beginnings of a stockade, clustered around the river's mouth. The big man pointed them to the fire and walked off, shouting at his companions. Cormac settled by the fire and tried to wring the water out of his robe. The Lochlainn ignored him, though they took care not to come too near. They sat in a circle of their own, talking and laughing, and for one queasy moment Cormac was reminded of the folk of his parish, how they gathered together at their celebrations.

He put a hand over his eyes and prayed, but even then his mind strayed from the words. *Have I fallen this far, Lord, simply by doing what I thought right? Unclean ... the bishop thought me unclean ... I want to go back. I want to know that what I'm doing is right. I want—*

"Stop muttering," said the girl, and he glanced at her. She kept watching him, sometimes out of the corner of her eye, sometimes straight on, though whenever he met her gaze she looked away. One of the Lochlainn approached her, grinning, but was stopped by a companion who muttered the word "varg" again.

Varg, he thought, watching her eyes. *Varg and exile. What a perfect pair.*

He woke early, out of a dream in which he was telling his grandmother again why he was entering the priesthood. Tents to either side rattled with loud snores, and the few visible Lochlainn slept as heavily as he had. There was no sign of the girl, though his cloak lay crumpled near the remains of the fire. He got to his feet, checked the letters again, then bent to pick up the cloak.

A hand clamped on his shoulder. "Prestr," rumbled the huge Lochlainn. "Fyr ulf maer."

He held out a bundle of cloth that Cormac slowly recognized as a dress. A brown crusted stain marred one side, a remnant of its original owner. He shivered and took the dress, knowing himself for a coward.

The man leered and clapped him on the shoulder. Cormac crimsoned, then turned and hurried away, expecting at any moment to feel a blade split his back. Coarse laughter followed him.

He struck a road going south. If there were brigands, he no longer cared. After a while, though, he found himself scanning the woods on either side of the road, searching for a gray shadow.

The wolf—the girl—didn't show herself until nightfall, fading into view so smoothly that he knew she'd been watching him for some time. He held out the dress. "They gave me this for you."

"That was good of them." The wolf's voice was as he remembered, and now he could hear its likeness to the girl's. It was deeper—a differently shaped throat, he guessed—and missed some of the sounds, as if the wolf's mouth couldn't close around them. It nosed at the cloth, then curled back as if trying to bite its own shoulder.

Cormac turned in time to avoid seeing the girl unclad. His face burned. *She's Lochlainn,* he thought; *she's a conniocht, a varg, and she could kill you without a second thought. Don't think of her as a woman.*

"I hadn't thought to bring any clothes with me," she said, her voice muffled. "I'd thought to stay a wolf the whole journey."

"Journey?" He turned; she was clothed, though the dress was too big and hung on her like a sail. "Where are you going?"

She shrugged. "Where are you going?"

He touched the packet of letters. "Rome," he said finally. "I have to go to Rome."

Her eyes widened. "Rome? That's—" She pointed, then let her arm drop, unable to illustrate just how far it was. "That's at the ends of the earth!"

"No. It's just across the ocean." And across many leagues of land, he added mentally, and then across the mountains.

"Why?"

"The bishop sent me with a message." It wasn't a lie, but it was a thin shield against the truth: the bishop did not expect Cormac to return. Nor did he. "You remember—when I first met you, the old woman you brought me to—"

"Maire. Her name was Maire."

Cormac paused. "Maire," he agreed. "And yours?"

"She called me Eithne. Go on."

"Right. Well, when you asked me to give her the last rites, there was a reason I didn't do so right away. It is a mortal sin to give the sacrament to a beast."

"But she wasn't a beast. I showed you."

"I know." And that was a memory that would stay with him till he died: the younger wolf worrying at her companion's shoulder, then pulling the hairy skin away so that it folded back to reveal an old woman, naked and with a gaping wound in her side. "But even after I'd given her the sacrament, I didn't know if I'd done right. The bishop didn't know either, so it was decided that I would go to Rome, to ask the Pope for his decision. Until then, I can't—" He looked down at his hands. "They would not take the sacraments from me."

They had turned their backs on him, and the light that had first driven him to the priesthood had gone out like a snuffed candle, leaving only chill smoke. The bishop had agreed that their objections were heretical—God's grace could not be tainted no matter the vessel—but heresy or no, it was hard to argue with, and impossible if all they did was turn their faces away when you began to speak.

He could understand why they did it. After all, he had gone to the aid of wolves. What flock could trust a shepherd that did so?

He had openly protested only once, saying that he been called to God's work. Where we are called, the bishop had said, is not the same as where we are sent. You were called, but we send you away now. Come back if God wills it.

"Stupid." Eithne tore up a handful of grass and shredded it. "Any-

one could see she was a woman once the pelt was gone."

"And anyone could see she was a wolf with the pelt."

She flapped a hand at him. "Too many words. You prestr, you churchmen, you use all those words. Maire wanted me to learn your words." She gazed at the ground, wringing the dress's hem. "That was why she did it. Why she bit me."

"Bit you?"

She nodded. "They don't usually let women with them on the raids. My folk. Scylding. I got lucky—I showed them how good I was with an axe, and they laughed and made me their good-luck token. Called me their little valkyrie." The word meant nothing to Cormac, but he nodded as if he understood. "When we came to your shores, it all went like they said, but some of the folk, they fought back." She twisted her hands together. "I wasn't as good as I thought I was. Got a spear in the stomach. Maire was there; she saw me dying, she —changed—and bit me.

"It slows the bleeding, if you're bitten." She brought her hands together as if to show the edges of a wound closing. "You heal up quicker. So I didn't die. She said she did that so I'd have time. So I could learn your words, the ones she thought were so important. So I could have my head splashed with the water."

"She cursed you so you could be saved." He smiled. "There's a kind of poetry in that."

She shook her head. "I never understood her."

"If being bitten makes you heal more quickly, why was she dying when—"

"She was old!" Eithne's eyes sparked. "Very old. It doesn't work so well when you get old."

Cormac looked at his hands. "So why are you following me, if she's gone?"

Eithne bit her lip and glanced at him, then at the ground. "You told her a story."

"A story?" The old woman had still been alive when he finished the sacrament, and so he had stayed with her, holding her hand. And she had pleaded with him to keep speaking, and unable to refuse, he'd told her a child's tale, of the giants of Knockmany Hill. It had been enough to see her through the last breaths.

"It was a good story. I miss ..." She looked out into the darkness, blinking very fast. Her skin was so pale that her eyelids looked bruised. "There are vargs and bearshirts at home, but we don't, don't talk to them. We send them to battle and stay away from them . . . I thought that was all for me. That and the churchman words, and they were all bare. Maire couldn't even tell me what they all meant." She pressed her lips together. "We had stories at home, we had a skald who could kenn ... I want a story."

"That's all? You want me to tell you a story?"

Eithne nodded, mutely defiant.

"I can't—" He paused. He did know many stories. His grandmother at least had seen to that, filling his head with her pretty pagan nonsense, and there were the dialogues between Patrick the saint and Oisin ... "I don't know if you'll like any of my stories."

"I want to hear them."

If you refuse, he told himself, *she'll leave. No more wolf, no more varg ... and you'll be alone again.* "Very well. This is one I heard from my grandmother, who heard it from her great-grandfather, who swore he heard it from the ghost of Fergus himself ..."

He told her the story of Emer's only jealousy, and then of the voyages of Bran, and then, hoping he was not falling into the sin of pride, the story of Jonah and the whale. It was a better story the further he got into it, and he imitated Jonah's petulance and the stern voice of God in a way that almost made Eithne smile. He even told a few of the Lord's own parables.

True to my home, he thought. *I'm a garrulous Ulsterman at heart, as bad as Macha's husband in the legend.* So he told her that story too.

When he finished, the moon was high and Eithne near sleep. He lay down, still watching her, and closed his eyes.

"Thank you," she said after a moment, and he wasn't sure whether it was the girl's voice or the wolf's.

In the morning, she was gone, but the dress was in a heap where she'd been sleeping. He bundled it with the rest of his possessions, then, facing the direction he thought she'd gone, bowed.

At dusk she showed up again, this time with two hares so fresh they were still warm. "More stories," she demanded, dropping the hares at his feet like a challenge. "But no more of the tickly ones." She twisted back and gnawed at her pelt.

He tossed her the dress and turned his back. "Tickly?" he said, and coughed to cover the break in his voice.

"The little ones you told. Like the one about the man and his three servants, or the mustard seeds." She walked past him and poked at the fire. "Those buzz around my head worse than bees." As if to illustrate it, she scratched at her yellow elf-locks again.

"They're meant to do that. To make you think." He examined the hares, took out his eating knife. "They're the kind of words Maire wanted you to learn, I think."

"Them? Those are just stories!"

"Yes, and no." He looked up from the hares and caught a wary, almost frightened look on Eithne's face. "If you want," he said, "I could baptize you."

She shook her head. "It wouldn't matter. Maire ate the bread every sevenday in the church, and she still wore her pelt whenever she liked."

"That's not why I'd do it. It was important to Maire that you be saved. She obviously thought so, or she wouldn't have curs—bitten you. And it's important to me, too."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Because you're a good person." *Because even if you didn't think I could do anything, you still brought me to Maire. Because I need to do something that is right.*

Eithne was silent a moment, then knelt beside him. "Give me that," she said, taking the knife out of his hand before he had a chance to respond. "You're doing it wrong." He looked away as she disemboweled and skinned both hares. "It wouldn't matter," she repeated. "She's dead now. It wouldn't change a thing."

"Eithne—"

"I want a story." She tore off a chunk of meat and spitted it on a stick.

Cormac watched her a moment, then sighed. "Very well."

He told her stories as they shared food—much better food than what he'd tried to cook. She listened avidly, drinking in his words, never looking away.

I had thought her a demon, he thought. *But she's as human as I. Perhaps if I could convince her to come to Rome with me, or even back to the bishop, she could stand as proof of my innocence ...*

And if I did, if I went back, forever after they would look at me as a coward, or as an exile still. And the light would remain dark. That road is gone for me. The only way back to it is through Rome.

"More," she said when he was done.

"No more. Not tonight. I must sleep."

She shrugged and got to her feet. "I'll keep watch."

He pulled his hood over his face and tried to sleep, though he was terribly aware of her presence close by. Aware of her as wolf, as woman, as varg. And aware of the light pressure of the cross against his breast.

There were few people on the road the next day. The wolf— Cormac had a hard time thinking of her as Eithne in this shape— stayed well back from the road, though he caught glimpses of her from time to time. Each time he knew he'd only seen her because she allowed it.

By late afternoon, though, the travelers had gone, and she trotted by his side like a sheepdog by a shepherd. He smiled to think of it, knowing she would hate the comparison.

"Why do you have to go all the way to Rome?" she asked, so abruptly that he first thought she had barked.

He glanced down at her. "I told you. The bishop decided that he didn't have the authority—"

"I don't care about that. The bishop isn't here. Why do you have to do what he says?"

"Because," he said, but she had hit the crux of it. No matter what he did from now on, he'd be an exile first and foremost.

There had been a carving on one of the panels in the sanctuary: the Apostle Thomas meeting Christ after the resurrection. When the other apostles had told him that Christ had appeared to them, he had called them liars and said he would not believe it till he could see for himself. And so Christ had appeared to him, and it was this scene the panel showed, Christ with his arm raised to show the wounds, Thomas reaching out to touch it, the Apostles gathered together on the other side like the parish at Mass.

The Apostle Thomas hadn't been exiled because of his doubt, he told himself. *He'd acknowledged the Resurrection, and Christ had not rebuked him for it. He'd been let back in—*

—but even now he was known as the doubter. Forgiveness came from God, but man clung to his memories.

"Because I have to," he finished, peevishly. "If nothing else, there needs to be a precedent, so that others will know what to do in this situation."

She shrugged. It was strange how the gesture translated itself to a wolf's shoulders; her entire body seemed to twitch. "You could just stay. Here. I could—"

A wolf howled, somewhere in the distance, and was answered. Cormac glanced at her, but she hadn't moved. "Maybe we should make camp, get a fire going—"

"No—listen—" The howl sounded again. "I—wait for me!"

With no more than that, she was gone.

In the end he just made camp where he was, at the side of the road, on the one dry patch of ground. The fire he made—to guide her back, he admitted—smoked and gave little heat, and the remnants of last night's hare made a poor meal on their own. *Better than you would have had at home,* he chided himself.

Sometime after sunset, it began to rain. He shivered and tucked his hands under the pouch of letters to warm them, then remembered himself and covered the pouch.

He waited for her, not knowing if she'd asked it of him or the other wolves, and fell asleep still waiting. He woke to the touch of her hand on his shoulder. "There are more," she said, still fumbling with the neck of her dress.

"More what?"

"More of them. Vargs. Conri—more like me!" She crossed her arms and hugged herself. "There's a whole village behind the hills. You wouldn't even find it if you didn't know where to look. I only found it because I was following them. They said there were only a few dozen of them, but they did the same thing I did, they could strip off their skins the same way—"

"More like you." He squinted at the sky; it was getting lighter with dawn, but there was a heavy gray color to the clouds. "That's good," he said, and heat prickled his cheeks at how doleful it sounded.

She turned to him, twisting the edges of her sleeves till they dug into her arms. "I told them about you. They're so—" She kicked at the cold remnants of the fire. "Some of them are so stupid! They get the stories wrong, not like you told them. They don't even know what a—a priest is. There was one old man, he said he knew what a priest was, they worshipped the sun and had to bathe in bull's blood once a year. I told him he was stupid." She looked askance at him. "You don't, do you?"

"Don't what?" He checked his pouch; the letters were still there and intact. They were all he had, now. Again.

"Bathe in bull's blood."

"Of course not!"

"That's what I told them. I had to swear on my pelt that it was true." She laughed shakily. It was a pretty sound, the first such he'd heard her make. "That's the first time I ever had to do that."

He gazed at her. The dress still hung off her, her hair was in ratted yellow mats and she was still spectrally thin. But there was a glow to her features that he hadn't seen before, a brightness that he knew well. The knowledge that no matter what, there was a place that accepted her. She had a home.

Who'd take in an exile? I could, she'd said, but she wouldn't say so now that she had her own place. And again he felt that chill that told him the light had gone out again. He hadn't even known it had returned—returned with her presence—and that made its loss hurt all the more. "Will you be going back?" he asked, unable to stop himself.

"I don't know. I should—" She stopped and looked at him, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. "I don't know."

With that she turned and walked away, her footsteps silent even in human form. He watched until she disappeared, then turned away.

He set out again on the road, this time at a slower pace. The rain had stopped, but the mist remained, and its clammy grip was worse. He couldn't distract himself with theoretical arguments, as he had when he began the journey; thinking of them only bared the wounds more. He even missed the sensation of being watched.

The trees leaned in over him, making a chapel of the woods, a nave of the road, the apse and altar somewhere farther east ...

It was for the best, he told himself. *She has her place now.* "For the best," he reminded himself, speaking aloud to drive the point home.

He'd miss telling those stories, he realized. Telling them, chanting them as his grandmother had done, even singing them ...

Very softly, he began singing one of the stories-in-song, the one of the invasions of Eire, matching its cadence to his pace. The trees leaned in over him, making a chapel of the woods, a nave of the road, the apse and altar somewhere farther east ...

"Got him!"

The cudgel came down on his neck before he even understood the words. He collapsed with a grunt, skinning his hands on the hard earth. "Get him off the road, quick," said another voice, and he groaned.

The first brigand rolled him over and yanked the packet of letters from his hands. "No—please—" Cormac cried, grabbing for it.

"Shut him up!"

The brigand's fist flashed as he drove it into Cormac's gut, and a second later Cormac realized why: he'd been holding a knife. A knife that was now deep in Cormac's stomach.

Cormac choked and reached for the letters, but they slid away from him as he hit the ground. "He's a churchman. See if he's got money," the second brigand said.

"Just paper." The one who'd knifed him rooted through the packet, then turned it upside down, scattering the letters over Cormac's chest. Cormac fumbled at them, trying to keep them out of the blood. "Check his clothes."

At first he thought the snarl was only his imagination conjuring a last nightmare, but the brigand leaning over him shouted, groping for his knife. A gray shape bore him to the ground, its teeth deep in his throat. The other man cursed and backed away, but the wolf turned to him, slavering red.

Cormac pressed weak hands to his stomach, trying to keep it all in, but everything had become so slippery, even the letters that no man would be able to read now. He couldn't hold on to anything. The second man's death-cry choked off in a low gurgle, and he closed his eyes, dimly grateful that he couldn't turn his head.

Only he couldn't then look away when the wolf leaned over him,

Continued on page 90

The Singers in the Tower

Some wounds do not heal, some scars do not fade, some hatreds never soften, some ghosts never die.

It happened one time that Rollin conquered Notrone.

In truth, this happened many times, but this time, the King of Notrone accompanied his shrew-blazoned banner, in chains, to the topmost tower of Seaward Castle. King Ventnor of Rollin was tired of having to conquer a little country like Notrone over and over. Instead of killing King Ramil of Notrone when he caught him, as his father and grandfather would have done, he took him home, in order to learn where Hidden Valley was.

BY PENI R. GRIFFIN ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW BAEK

Ventnor permitted Ramil no books, and no paper, and no company but torturers, a sympathetic servant who offered to smuggle messages, fair ladies who swore love undying, and anyone else who might loosen his tongue. Ramil knew all the ins and outs of Hidden Valley; but he knew also that the safety of his family and the future of Notrone depended on his making no misjudgment. He never spoke, only sat in his bare room, singing, in his fine baritone, all the old songs of the Shrews, especially those that made fun of the conquerors. Ten years he sang, and ten years Ventnor tried to worm his secrets out of him; and at the end of ten years, Ramil's oldest son Shimar led the rebellion.

Shimar and his closest knights were taken. Ventnor's councilors thought the line must be crushed at last. But Ventnor retorted: "Don't you know that Shrews have large litters? Ramil had six children, to grow up one by one and try anew, or lie hidden and breed until our grandchildren are lulled to sleep. We must find the location of the Valley."

So Ventnor took Shimar and his four knights and placed them in the tower with Ramil, thinking, "These men all know each other, and caution will drop away, and Ramil will stop singing and start talking at last."

But they only embraced, and wept, and sang, Shimar and his knights teaching their king the new songs of their failed rebellion. What the listeners in the woodwork did not discover was that the new prisoners had skill in ropemaking. So they sang and braided strips of their clothing together, retaining no scrap to wear; and on the night of winter solstice, when the whole city reveled and the listener was weary with desire to join the merriment, they let the rope of clothing out through the window. It was barred, but Ramil had passed ten years with nothing to do but deal with that.

Ramil and his three knights and his two vagabonds sang; all day and all night, night after night, long after they died of thirst and hunger, and winter cold.

Certain vagabonds awaited them with clothing and a boat. But on this night of all nights, no sea fog surrounded the Seaward Castle, and the guards, though distracted as well as the vagabonds could contrive, were not yet so drunk that they could not see six naked men descend the tower's side. There was nothing for the escapees to do but keep climbing, and be targets; or let go, and break their bones.

Shimar and a knight died, the others were wounded, and how many vagabonds escaped is a mystery, but two were taken. Ventnor would have had the spy in the woodwork whipped, except that the woodwork had been torn down and the spy strangled. So he whipped the prisoners, instead, and bricked up the window except for a span no bigger than his spread hand, and bricked up the chimney, and had all the woodwork torn out, so there was nothing but bare cold stone. Then he threw the naked prisoners in, saying, "Sing till you die, for all I care—you won't get out till ropes are made of sea fog." Then he bricked up the door and returned to his interrupted feast.

Ramil and his three knights and his two vagabonds sang; all day and all night, night after night, long after they died of thirst and hunger and winter cold. Their singing disturbed Ventnor's sleep, until the summer morning that he was found with blood all over his pillow, and no head on it. His son blamed Shrewish rebels, and even hung some people for it, but no one ever produced the head. The Shrews in the tower sang all through the coronation; and Ventnor's son had the New Palace built to get away from their singing.

They were still singing twenty years later when Shimar's little sister Ruby freed Notrone; and fifty years after that when Cartrin conquered Notrone; and thirty years after that, when Rollin took Notrone away from Cartrin; and through all the vicissitudes of conquest after that. The Seaward Castle crumbled away, save for the Haunted Tower; and the people of Crownport grew as used to the singing as they were to the sea fog and the cry of the gulls.

Sheldra passed the Haunted Tower every morning on her way to the dressmaking shop on Silk Street and again every evening on her way to Mistgut Alley. Because she kept such long hours, she seldom saw it, except when a full moon combined with a fog-free atmosphere. She accepted on faith that the distant roof was red tile, and that the streaks on its sides were not merely damp, but the ancient blood of her countrymen.

She heard the ghosts, of course. When the wind was right and the clatter of traffic quieted on nights warm enough to leave the shutter open, the attic she shared with her brother Ranu was close enough to catch every note. "Snap, snip, tear, rip," the bodiless chorus sang, the war song as old as the Shrew banner of Notrone; or "Ruby waits in the valley/patient and alone; Ruby waits in the valley/for me to bring her home," which dated back to the first conquest and the smuggling of the ruby crown to safety in Hidden Valley.

Sheldra would wrap her hood around her ears, rather than be suspected of listening. Not that anyone could tell, till she spoke, that she came from Notrone; not like Ranu, with his red hair and wiry mountain-bred body. They had discussed patriotism before they came north, argued it out with their parents. After all, Rollin was the enemy. The royal family, safe in Hidden Valley, would return to drive the invader out.

Sure they would. Meantime, the farm barely supported the family in a good year. Here was Ranu, with his frighteningly large amount of brain with its frighteningly small capacity for common sense, and nowhere to train him to his full capacity but the University in Crownport, the heart of enemy territory. Everyone agreed that he could no more look after himself there than a baby in a badger's den. And here was Sheldra, his favorite sister, with her skillful needle and careful housewifery, sick to death of being a Shrew—the poverty, the secret weapons training, the eternal waiting for a return that would mean war, and more poverty, and in the end probably (but she didn't say this to her parents) more defeat.

So she made Ranu swear to swallow insults with a smile, not to whistle the old songs, to pretend he didn't know a sword from a pickle fork, and use all his time at the University to make a place for himself in a world in which Notrone was dead.

"Notrone is dead," she whispered, as the voices of the ghosts drifted over the sill, as they ate day-old bread and overripe fruit from the bowls Ranu had stolen from the University dining hall.

"Notrone is dead, but so are they, and they keep singing," said Ranu.

"Singing's what they died of," said Sheldra. "The Rollies laugh about it."

She heard them laugh, when they noticed the singing—even the poor Rollish who were their neighbors, thinner and more pinched in the face than the poorest dirt farmers back home. Their landlady would laugh, and cough, and sneer, "Stupid Shrews! Can't warm yourself in a song, can you?"

Sheldra would shake her head and answer, "No, ma'am," and pay the rent, pretending not to know that she paid a third as much more than the inhabitant of the front attic.

Ranu was not the only student sweeping floors and washing dishes to pay his tuition. He wasn't even the only student from Notrone. But he was the only Shrew in the mathematics department. The other maths were all Rollish gentry, young blades with old names, pursuing a higher calling precisely because it had so little practical use. There was even a prince among them—not *the* prince, but a brother.

The professor, Dr. Trisho, had cautioned Ranu not to associate with his countrymen. "They're all rebels," he said. "History, law, philosophy—you can see them, studying the fields that feed revolution and longing to sing themselves to death for a lost cause. Stick to the numbers. They're the only sure things, and sooner or later, anyone who loves them will forgive you your birth, for you're the best mathematician in the class, and they'll see it in time."

"In time" was not before winter set in; Sheldra worked till her fingers bled to meet the holiday demand and keep Ranu in the candles and paper necessary to write his paper on the Golden Mean.

"Wouldn't the Golden Kind be better?" asked Londi, the buttonholer.

"You can't get kindness at University," said Sheldra. "Meanness is all they teach."

"And wastefulness," said Mila, the proprietor, embroidering furiously with her own hands; that was how busy they were. "Which is good for us. Do you think we'd have half the business, if the University girls weren't writing on their cuffs, to prove how clever they are, and the University boys weren't sticking holes in their shirts with swords, to prove how brave they are?" The laws against dueling had been made twice as harsh this year, with the result that duels were fought twice as often, and a proper mess it made of the ruffled shirts and velvet cloaks in vogue. "Us and the laundresses have plenty to be thankful for this year, and if I ever get some sleep I'll be as grateful as anyone could wish. Is anyone else too warm?"

They all were. At night with the shutters closed and the candles lit, the air grew stale. Mila stood on a stool to open the window a crack. "Ruby waits in the valley/patient and alone," sang the ghosts; the hour was so late that hardly any traffic existed to drown them out, even at this distance. On her way back to her seat, Mila stopped at Sheldra's side. Sheldra kept her hand steady. The row of even, tiny stitches lengthened at the same pace as before. "Why don't you help Londi with the buttonholing?" Mila asked.

"Because I'm not paid buttonholing rate," said Sheldra.

Mila flipped her hands at the wrist. "You are now."

"Thank you, ma'am." Sheldra finished her seam before moving to sit by Londi in the prime space below the oil lamp.

Londi was lame, and sweet, and hummed "Ruby waits" along with the ghosts as her needle flickered. "I've always wondered," she said to Sheldra, "why they sing love songs as well as war songs and satires."

"They only sound like love songs," said Sheldra. "They're about something else."

"Like killing us," said Poppy, trimming a sealskin cloak.

Sheldra said nothing.

"I think it's noble, and fine, and sad," said Bru, the embroiderer. "It must be splendid to have a cause you care for so much you stay faithful to it after death."

"They're not singing of their own will anymore," said Londi, who had studied magical theory at the University till her money ran out, and was saving for another semester. "When Ventnor told them to sing till someone made ropes of sea fog, he cursed them. If someone made the ropes, they'd be freed."

"Someone should try," said Bru. "Three hundred years is long enough to be trapped on earth, and in mere mercy they ought to be allowed to go on to heaven."

They wouldn't go, thought Sheldra.

When she got home, Ranu was crouched over his manuscript, his a candle about to drown in wax, and the soup cooked to glue. "You haven't eaten," said Sheldra.

"I was waiting for you." He had ink on his nose and all over his hands; but the manuscript was fair and clean. "And I needed a clean table. Let me copy out this last sentence, and then we'll eat."

Sheldra smiled. He still copied his work as he had when he was ten, his tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth. She blew the brazier into brighter life and put on the kettle for tea.

Ranu threw the worn-out pen onto the floor and stretched the cramp out of his hand. "That's done, and I hope Dr. Trisho likes it, because for now, I don't! How was your day?"

"It was a day," said Sheldra, dishing up gelid soup. "I got a raise— three more crowns a week."

"Hurray! Now we can get you a new pair of shoes!"

"We'll see," said Sheldra, who had resolved that her first action on getting paid would be to go to Book Row and bargain down the price on the treatise Ranu had been gazing at, but not allowed to touch, since they arrived in town. "I hear your famous classmate was in another duel. His opponent wore his best shirt, and now he needs one just like it, only better, before Solstice."

"Hmph! If you can call it a duel, when no one dares to stick him," said Ranu, sanding his page. "I've seen Prince Hul fence, and he leaves a trail to his ribs you could follow in the dark; but he thinks he's got nothing to learn because his opponents let him win."

"You—don't say that to anyone in your class, do you?"

Ranu laughed, no doubt remembering the same youthful incident that she did, when his honesty had resulted in two black eyes. "No, I'm not that stupid. Anymore!" He poked at the paste in his bowl. "I didn't use enough water, did I?"

"You didn't eat it soon enough," said Sheldra.

They ate, the taste of onion and potato and slightly old basil quickening their tired stomachs. "There'll be a Solstice dinner at Seaward Hall, penny a plate," said Ranu, when his spoon scraped the bowl.

Sheldra clicked her tongue. "Across from the Haunted Tower, where the Shrews gather? Too expensive!"

Ranu frowned. "They're having goat."

"And a rousing chorus of 'We return like the sun,' and arrests all around. I think our crowns will stretch to a goat. We can roast it at the cookshop on the corner."

The candle extinguished itself, and they washed up, drank their tea, and went to bed by the dim light of the brazier. A rat gnawed inside the wall by Sheldra's bed. "Do you suppose they have the greens up at home yet?" asked Ranu.

"Bound to," said Sheldra. "And they're playing crackernuts, and thinking of us. Pick up a branch on your way home tomorrow."

The attic made a poor show, with only one branch and a string of nuts; but they were seldom home anyway. Dr. Trisho, pleased with Ranu's paper, gave him a pass to sit in the library till all hours, and invited him home to supper a couple of times. Sheldra worked till she was nearly blind and felt her hands would

never be straight. By the afternoon of the day before Solstice the last gowns, cloaks, and shirts were in the hands of the ironers, and Mila handed out the wages, with not only an increase in pay, but a bonus. "I'm going to sleep for three days," she said. "Don't let me see any of you back here before then!"

The dressmakers scattered, blinking in the light, though the afternoon was dim enough, in truth, with the smell of fog in the air. "Are you going toward the University?" asked Londi. "I want to squander my bonus on books."

"Me, too," said Sheldra, slowing her steps. The clash of traffic and the cries of gulls drowned most other sounds, though here and there a minstrel belted out Solstice songs. Book Row was crowded with laughing, jostling, singing, arguing, browsing students in inky sleeves and shabby cloaks—except for those who glittered, for whom the others made way.

Sheldra went to the booth with the treatise, and Londi browsed while she bargained, getting the work at last for three-quarters what the seller had quoted to get rid of Ranu. Londi did not bargain so well, or perhaps it was that she could not restrict herself to a single book. She paid her money, and laughed, and said, "It looks as though my Solstice dinner will be books and bread, as usual."

Her people were all far away, Sheldra knew; Londi rented a room alone in Gull Alley. "You should eat roast goat with us," she said. "There's more than Ranu and I can eat; and we'll have roast potatoes, and enough applesauce to drown in."

"I could turn my bread into pudding, as my contribution, if I can find the eggs and milk," said Londi, struggling with her books. Sheldra reached out to help her, and nearly lost her own; and while they juggled one of the browsers, walking too swiftly and turning to speak to his neighbor, barreled into them and knocked all three down.

Londi, though she landed on her lame foot, laughed, so Sheldra laughed too, as she scrambled up and put a hand down. "Are you all right?" she asked; but the young man in the embroidered velvet cloak, with a froth of ruffles and lace from his waist to his chin, glared at her from under a fringe of curled hair. "Why don't you look where you're going?"

Four lordlings, in costumes echoing his own, clustered about to help him to his feet. Sheldra didn't know the faces, but she recognized the clothes. "I'm sorry, your Highness," she said to Prince Hul, helping Londi up. They were all more or less covered in mud and worse—her knees, all down Londi's side, and great smears on the Prince's cloak and sleeve.

"And so you should be! This cloak is ruined!"

"If you take it directly to Tibat's in River Street, they may be able to rescue it, sir," suggested Sheldra.

"Be quiet, Shrew!" snapped one of the lordlings; but Prince Hul laughed, not pleasantly.

"Yes, that's a Shrew voice, though the face is pretty enough for a real girl. What does a Shrew know about cleaning velvet?"

Sheldra's mouth dried up and she felt herself turn red. "We're dressmakers, sire," Londi said, clutching her books like a shield. "Tibat's is the best."

"I wasn't speaking to you," said Prince Hul.

Sheldra swallowed. "We're dressmakers, sire, and Tibat's is the best."

"Dressmakers—or parrots—or merely drumming up business for Tibat—what do you want with books?" He took the treatise from Sheldra's unresisting hands. His plucked eyebrows rose. "And such books! Do you expect to understand geometry?"

"No, sire." What did he care? Why wouldn't he go to Tibat's?

"Yet you spent two crowns or more on this book—for what?"

Her feet were cold, but her face was hot. "For my brother. Sir."

"Brother? Oh—I see!" He looked illuminated, and she was afraid to understand why he cared. "Sirs, we are greatly honored today! This is Sir Carrot-top's sister!"

The lordlings laughed and clustered round, cutting her off from Londi, and Sheldra wondered just how incautiously Dr. Trisho had preferred Ranu's paper to the prince's. He held up the book by the tips of his gloved fingers. She held her hands limp by her sides, but could not hold her blood still. "Here, I think, we see the secret of mathematical success," said the prince. "An attractive sister—more or less!—devoted to one's interests, willing and able to keep one in books and papers by the nimbleness of her hands."

"And other parts, maybe," suggested a lordling. "Trisho's wife is dead."

Sheldra reviewed in her mind (as her mother had advised her, for occasions like this) all the places on the prince's body where she could have created a fountain of blood, had she chosen to use the needle and scissors in the kit at her waist.

The prince shuddered delicately and dropped the book onto the smeared pavement. "Let us hope not. One prefers to respect one's professors."

"And one prefers to respect one's prince," said Ranu, shoving his way into the group as Sheldra retrieved the book and screamed, inside: *No, Ranu, no, it's almost over!* "But it isn't possible. Leave my sister alone, sire."

But it wasn't about her. She saw that as the prince looked down his nose at Ranu—a long way down, it seemed, though they were much of a height. "I'm sorry, I believe there's something wrong with my ears," he said. "I thought I heard this shrewish nobody criticize his prince's behavior."

"There's a great deal wrong with you, your highness, but as far as I can tell your ears are in perfect working order. However, if you will apologize to my sister, I will forego satisfaction."

Sheldra heard Londi squeak but was too busy holding her breath and her body perfectly still to make any sound herself.

"You're challenging me?"

"I don't see how, in honor, I could do anything else."

The prince laughed—a short, insincere laugh, but perhaps it sounded normal to him. "You have no honor, Carrots. I wouldn't soil my hands with your blood."

"You mean you couldn't," said Ranu. "Well, that's fair. Apologize to my sister, and we'll call it quits."

Sheldra closed her eyes, but she saw the ritual gesture of acceptance anyway, as clearly as if her lids were transparent. "Name your friend, sir—if you can."

"Your friend will have no difficulty finding him at Seaward Hall."

"You have no friends at Seaward Hall," said Sheldra, as they walked off together.

"Somebody there will stand with me," said Ranu. "Don't look so tragic! If I can swallow the anger—and Almighty knows I've had practice—this will turn our lives around."

"Not in a direction you'll like," said Londi, skipping awkwardly alongside them under her burden of books. "Prince Hul has never been defeated, and when you show up wounded, they'll expel you for breaking the law! Only nobility get away with dueling. If you don't have a title, the University will throw you out."

"Prince Hul has never been defeated because he only challenges spineless aristocrats who won't jeopardize their future careers by wounding him," said Ranu, nearly oversetting her by taking her books without warning. "I understand the dueling code as well as any of those boys, and I fence better than any three of them. Which is not bragging. Anyone from home could. The point is, after dueling, the participants are required—required!—to set aside their differences. They needn't be my friends, but they must acknowledge that I have honor and can defend it. Once the prince is courteous to me, people will no longer be afraid to speak to me, and I'll finally have a hope of a career! No, the only thing I'm upset about is that I waited to see you abused before I

took offense. I'm so sorry, Sheldra—but I'll make it up to you."

"He won't have to treat you like a human being, because you'll be expelled for dueling," said Sheldra. "Or do you trust him to prick you where it won't show? I know he normally likes to wound on the torso, but if he hates you so much, I expect he can contrive to find your face."

Ranu rolled his eyes. "You don't expect me to let him win, do you?"

"You can't wound the prince!" Londi protested.

"I don't expect I'll have to," said Ranu. "A quick disarm and riposte, and it's all over."

They argued all the way to Seaward Hall. Any lingering hope Sheldra had that cooler heads here would bring Ranu round were shattered by the reaction of the student acquaintance whom Ranu approached amid the bustle of Solstice preparations. As soon as he understood the problem, he hustled them into the presence of someone Sheldra recognized, by his bearing, as a militia officer, who seized on Ranu like a cat seizing a piece of liver. Defeated, she sank into a seat in a corner.

Londi sat by her, lap full of books, and pressed her hand. "So much for our jolly Solstice dinner!"

"You should go," said Sheldra. "This isn't your mess."

"I caused it. I knocked you over."

"That's not what caused this." The noise in the hall could not drown out the singing across the street, and the crowd hiding her brother seemed to move in rhythm to the song.

"I have a neighbor with a boat," said Londi. "If we could drag him away from them ..."

Sheldra wished she'd mentioned it before, when they were free in the streets. The Shrews had their teeth and claws in Ranu now. Londi talked about what an easy run it was, even at midwinter, to her home village, and how her mother would be too glad to see her to ask awkward questions. The Tower sang, in four-part harmony, what they always sang when the day began to darken: Fog in the street, fog in the head,/ fog by night and by day,/fog in the heart and fog in the hand/till the mountain wind blows it away.

"King Ventnor wasn't a wizard, was he?" Sheldra asked.

"What? No."

"But you said he cursed them. When he told them to make ropes of sea fog."

"Anybody can curse. At least—when you've despaired—King Ventnor realized that he would never finish conquering Notrone. It ate him up. A curse takes your despair, and makes it a real thing." She squeezed Sheldra's hands. "What you're feeling now—it won't come to that. Everything can still be all right."

No, it can't! You don't know these people! Sheldra wanted to scream; but she smiled shakily at Londi.

The prince's second arrived with an entourage, as if expecting trouble; but the Shrews let him through to make the arrangements with the militia captain. Sheldra watched the tall lordlings making an island in a sea of red hair and faded shirts, and wondered if they suspected that they were surrounded by those who not only wanted to, but could, tear them limb from limb without any weapons. That, however, would be mere reckless assassination. Ranu and Prince Hul had created an opportunity for higher stakes.

The noise in the hall could not drown out the singing across the street, and the crowd hiding her brother seemed to move in rhythm to the song.

Swords at dawn. The usual place—the pasture beyond the New Palace, outside the range of city patrols. The prince would slip away from the ball, and they would duel in the first light, while his father and brother performed the Solstice rites. It was impious, but no one objected.

Fog sneaked across the windows as the lordlings departed. "There won't be any light at dawn," said Londi. "Will they call off the fight if it's too dark?"

"They won't call off the fight if the world ends," said Sheldra.

The room smelled of salt, sweat, bread, roast goat, and cinnamon. In the corners, children played crackernuts. A young woman wrapped in an apron brought a mug of steaming cider to Sheldra and looked at Londi. "This is a strange place to find a Rollie," she said.

"I'm Sheldra's friend," said Londi. "And it's my fault the prince noticed her."

"All the same, you shouldn't be here," said the Shrew. "It's treason to choose your friend over your prince."

And treason to have a Rollie for a friend—treason to country and friend both. Sheldra opened her mouth, intending to tell Londi to go; and said instead: "She's a wizard. She can show us the duel. So we'll know."

The woman vanished, brought a mug for Londi, vanished again. "How many does your boat hold?" Sheldra asked.

"Five, in a pinch," said Londi. "It's not my boat. But I'm sure my neighbor will loan it to me."

"Can you take it out in the fog?"

"It's dangerous. But I know the port, and the coast between here and home, like I know the streets here. And in an emergency, if we had someone in the bows to fend off and throw the lead, we could get out of the harbor and ride a sea anchor off of Heron Point until the wind came."

Ranu came by, flushed, and smiling. "Everything's going beautifully. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not," said Sheldra, hope burning across her chest. "Isn't it stuffy in here, though? I was thinking we could get out, take Londi home, drop the book off at the attic."

"Isn't it getting nasty out?" He looked at Londi doubtfully. "But you should go."

"Not without Sheldra," said Londi. "And she won't leave without you. You don't plan to stay all night, do you?"

"Actually, yes," said Ranu. "I need a sword, and a silk shirt, and—oh, a dozen things. You've no idea how complicated it is. I don't see any sense in your hanging about the whole time, though. Go if you want to."

Sheldra shook her head, counting the attentive faces watching them, the people who could deflect him before they reached the door. "We'll wait till you're ready."

Fog covered the windows. Lamps flared. Women bustled in and out of the kitchen, men set up tables, a crone fed sea coal to the fire. Sheldra, knowing that the kitchen held a dozen ways to send someone to sleep or render him ill (a little piece of home, the poison cache!), offered to help, but the militia captain's daughter told her she was an honored guest and not to lift a finger. The song from the Tower permeated the hall, King Ramil's rich baritone leading his knights and his vagabonds and the Shrews who

served his great-great-great-grandchildren in a song of exile. Londi hummed. Sheldra kept her mouth closed and her throat still. Ranu brought her a silk shirt, many times too big for him, and asked her to alter it.

With Londi's help she had it ready before the feast. More Shrews came in. She saw them look at her and Londi, eyes wide; saw them seek out Ranu, whisper among themselves, their eyes burning fiercely. Ranu and Londi were the only ones in the room who didn't know how the night would end. As the table was being spread, she got up to seek the outhouse and found the captain as well.

"It's murder," she said. "You can't let him."

"Murder? Is that what your parents taught you—that defending your country is a crime, if you do it the way you can, instead of according to the rules the conquerors make?"

"He's not defending anything but his right to be a mathematician," she said. "He's not doing this for Notrone, or even for my honor. He's doing it to become one of them. He's betraying Notrone. Will you let him do that?"

"If he can best serve Notrone by betraying her, so be it," said the captain.

They sat at the place of honor, where perfectly roasted goat turned to ashes in Sheldra's mouth and baked apples as tender as love stuck in her throat. She tried to explain to Ranu what would happen, but the captain and Ranu's natural thick-headedness interrupted her time and again. Then a hundred pairs of hands cleared the table and washed dishes as the band tuned—two drums, a fiddle, two lutes, and a horn. They took their notes from the singing of the ghosts; and the singing lingered, repeating bars, helping them.

Sheldra, up to her elbows in hot water, felt cold.

Dancing began, the good thumping jumping reels that began all proper parties, and hope twinged in her again. She showed Londi the back door, onto a cold, dank alley that led to the docks. "When we get to the forbidden songs, if the guards come, you must slip out here. For us it's a week or so in prison. For you, it'd be your head."

"If he's in prison, he can't duel," said Londi. "Will the prince have thought of that? He could call off the guards."

He could. And which would he prefer—to sneer at his classmate for not appearing, or to lord it over him for losing? Sheldra could not guess. When the voices made the rafters shake with the force of forbidden music, she thrilled, whirling from hand to hand; but the door never burst open, no boots thundered in the street; not even for the sword dance; not even for the climactic chorus of "We return like the sun," the Solstice hymn that wasn't about Solstice at all.

Rollie parties lasted all night, but Shrews were farmers and fighters and liked their sleep. After "We return like the sun," the minstrels put the strings and horn away, and the lamps burned low, and the drums and the voices sang, but Sheldra did not:

The mountains are cold, that guard my love;
The valleys are dark, that hide her.
The grass and rain must make her bed,
For I come no more nigh her.
A sword of stars, a crown of blood,
A banner sewn of fire;
But I am clad in rags of fog
And must come no more nigh her.

The party broke up, and the captain's daughter led them upstairs to dark, cold rooms with cots. "Sleep well," Ranu said. "Londi, thanks for standing by her." He went into the next room.

"Don't worry," the captain's daughter said. "No harm will come to him before time. We guard all the doors."

Londi and Sheldra looked at each other, as the lock clicked behind them. "Locks can be picked," said Londi.

"She's telling the truth about the guards," said Sheldra. "Go to sleep. If you can."

Sheldra huddled on the cot all night, hearing the singing faintly. Stupid Rollies. Why haven't they torn that place down? Why haven't they rounded us up? She rose when she heard movement in the corridors, and woke Londi, so that they stood together when the door opened and Ranu entered, smiling, with a lamp, to show them how well his silk shirt fit and his sword hung. It was a good, plain infantry sword, for slashing and for thrusting, mere possession calling for a year's wages in fines. "Has it occurred to you that someone might be waiting to nab you for carrying that?" Sheldra asked.

"It's all right." He hugged her. "The prince would be as disgraced by that as I would. More."

Hope twinged; because it did not seem possible that Prince Hul would feel disgraced by such a trick.

They drank a cup of hot chicory together in the kitchen, and Ranu kissed her before he and the captain walked off torchless into the crawling salt fog. "They won't be able to see each other," said Londi. "It's happened before. A few thrusts at random, the seconds declare conditions impossible and honor satisfied, and everyone troops off to breakfast."

"We'll soon see," said the captain's daughter, smiling at her ignorance. "What do you need for your spell?"

Londi brightened, and Sheldra's heart twisted. She volunteered to run back and forth to the fountain, bringing the water to fill the washtub wherein to scry the progress of disaster; but the captain's daughter would not let her and did the chore herself. Sheldra peered through the shutters of windows too small to squeeze through. The Haunted Tower murmured its songs, invisible in the fog, and dim figures hurried past, clanking. Men and women with whom she'd danced loomed and vanished, faces set, not frightened and not eager, carrying chains, boat hooks, broken chair legs, slings, stones, hatchets, knives, scissors. In ones and twos they slipped past, wraiths in leather jackets with their red hair covered, and the Tower sang for them: Snap, snip, tear, rip.

In ones and twos they slipped past, wraiths in leather jackets with their red hair covered, and the Tower sang for them: Snap, snip, tear, rip.

She didn't mention them to Londi. Why spoil her innocent enjoyment in casting the spell?

Old men and women arrived, children in tow, and clustered silent around Londi as she poured in the last bucket of water, chanting; leaned over; breathed on the surface. Far away over the mountains, the sun rose, but here was no light. *All is lost,* Sheldra thought, but she still felt pain, which meant she still felt hope. Londi passed her hand across the water. A mist rose. Without light, they all saw.

Prince Hul had been drinking. His eyes were bright as fever, and he wore the ruffles and lace Mila had worked on for four days

and nights. His second, in company with the captain, paced out the dueling ground and inspected the swords. The lord's lip curled when he examined Ranu's blade, but the captain's face remained impassive as he examined the prince's. Ranu waited, as Shrews always waited, using a handkerchief Sheldra'd made for him on his raw nose.

The seconds moved back. The principals advanced and bowed, the prince ironically, Ranu with exact propriety. Sheldra knew what would happen, but she watched anyway. The pass, the feint, the prince's sword flying from his hand, the touch above his heart, the pause without striking home, her brother's mouth moving—"Do you yield, sir?"

The Prince snatched a dagger from the sash at his waist, and lunged under Ranu's guard.

Ranu was innocent enough to be bewildered, but Shrew enough that it didn't matter. Sober sword against drunken dagger, there was no chance for the prince, except for Ranu's mercy; and when the prince's second drew his sword, that hope died, too. The second died at the captain's feet, and figures moved in from the fog: the prince's friends who had come to see the fun, bearing their swords.

Ranu refrained from killing the prince for longer than Sheldra had expected, but what else could he have done with someone who left his ribs exposed like that? The infantry sword slid between them in a stroke that would have made their father proud, and the prince shouted blood. Ranu and the captain went back to back as the lordlings closed in, and the first stones rained out of the fog.

Londi whimpered. Sheldra grabbed her hand, and the view in the water remained as long as the pain of hope remained; as three lords, howling, set upon Ranu; as he went down; as the Shrews with their makeshift weapons fell upon the backs of the lords, and thus acquired swords. Even then, she did not stop hurting until the battle moved away and left her brother bleeding atop the prince. She released Londi's hand and heard the room breathe as the spell faded.

"But this is—this is—It can't be happening. There's something wrong with my spell." Londi was crying.

"It's a good spell," said Sheldra. "Thank you." She turned to the captain's daughter. "She knows where there's a boat, and she knows the coast. Let her live long enough to take some of the children away."

Londi squeaked. "I can't—Sheldra, I'm sorry, I can't! I have to—I don't know, there must be something!"

"If you want to live, you'll take who she tells you to take and go where she tells you to go," said Sheldra. "Maybe this will teach you not to hum songs you don't understand."

"But Sheldra—" Londi wailed.

Sheldra slapped her.

Londi fell silent, and her soft eyes went hard. The pain in Sheldra's chest stopped at last, as a crone gathered Londi up with all the children and hustled them away. Sheldra watched them go, fingers of fog resting on her cheek. The captain's daughter stood behind her. "Are you for escape, or attack?" she asked.

"I have other business."

"What other business can there be for a Shrew?"

"You'll see." Or she wouldn't. Sheldra didn't care.

She moved into the street, pulling her scissors out of her sewing kit, and cut long strips out of the fog.

It was easy, as nothing had ever been easy before, as if it were the only possible thing that she could do now. By the time her countrymen vanished in their various directions—to attack, to evade, to strike and run, to steal boats and horses, to do all the things one did in a rebellion—she had seated herself on the edge of the fountain, with the swatches of fog in her lap, and begun braiding her rope.

The strands tangled in her lap until she tied them to the head of the statue of King Ventnor in the fountain's center. The salt stung her fingers, pricked from months of needlework. Bells rang, and she smelled smoke and fish guts and cinnamon as the sun lit the fog on the shortest day of the year.

Soon she had used all the fog in the street. Watery light warmed her. The small barred window was a dark hole under the red tile roof. It was too small for a man; but they had passed ten years with nothing to do but deal with that.

"Ruby waits in the valley, patient and alone," sang the baritone, counterpoint to the bells.

"Ramil!"

For the first time in three hundred years, the baritone voice left the tune to the others.

Her first throw fell short. It needed weight. She went into Seaward Hall and found the treatise on geometry that Ranu would never read; a handy size. She tied the rope tight around it, and swung it gently a few times before she threw. The book arced high overhead, and a pale, thin hand reached out, and snatched it as it began to fall. She waited, paying the rope out while the end was pulled in and tied around one of the remaining bars. The hand came out again and motioned her to stand back.

She stood back.

Stones beside the window fell outward, creating a new fog of mortar dust.

She heard screaming, and running feet, and the captain's daughter cried, as thousands of daughters had cried since the banner was first sewn: "A Shrew! A Shrew!"

For the first time in three hundred years, the Haunted Tower fell silent, as King Ramil led his three knights and two vagabonds into the sunlight of the enemy city. They were wiry, with thin red hair and thin gray faces, and each one, when his flesh-bare feet touched the ground, saluted Sheldra. She saluted in return, but did not bow.

Shrews don't bow, to anyone, not even to their own kings; and she was a Shrew, whether she wanted to be or not.

They beckoned. "Do what you have to," she said, sitting on the edge of the fountain. "I'll sit in the sun, while I can." She watched them walk down the street, then closed her eyes. The spray from the fountain had soaked her through long ago, but she was not cold. She was not warm. She merely was.

To what degree the Solstice Uprising succeeded is a subject of debate in Notrone. On the one hand, it began yet another rebellion that cost many lives and did not, even temporarily, result in freedom. Indeed, the immediate reprisals were some of the worst in that long, bad history. On the other hand, the crown of Rollin passed to a cadet branch, which whether from prudence or gratitude was ultimately an easier regime under which to be a Shrew.

The new king razed the Haunted Tower. Indeed, much of that quarter was torn down and built anew, so that in later years Sheldra was usually lost. Her countrymen fed her from respect. She felt neither cold in winter nor heat in summer, wrapped in cloaks of fog. The guards declined to round her up. "She's a harmless madwoman," they said to the citizens; but to themselves they said, "No one saw what happened to the ghosts, and you know they're grateful to her."

During her lifetime, it was supposed that she would be yet another ghost haunting the quarter; but she was found dead at the fountain on the sixtieth anniversary of the rising, and no one ever saw her after that.

As for Londi, she eluded her captors after seeing the children to safety, and eventually completed her degree in Trostis, because it's warm there, and they never conquered anyone. She married an actor, produced illusions for the Opera House, had two children, and died in bed.

It's a poor story that doesn't end well for someone.❧

LAUGHING AT FRANKENSTEIN

With equal parts literary talent and artistic genius, Adam Rex heads for the top in the world of children's books.

BY KAREN HABER

Adam Rex may be the only artist with a literary agent instead of an artist's rep. But that's because he has a definite way with words as well as pictures. A quick look at his best-selling children's book *Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich,* or his two new books, *The True Meaning of Smekday,* and *Psst,* will confirm his skill as a wordsmith.

"I enjoy working the word end of things because it's more of a challenge," Adam says. "I'm already comfortable with the image, which might breed a bit of ennui. Working with words, trying to make an entire novel work, is exciting and terrifying in equal measures."

He's definitely one artist who could put down his brushes and paints any time and write humorous poetry and tall tales for a living. But let's be grateful he's decided to straddle the line between fine and literary arts.

His writing might be described as "the love child of Douglas Adams and Shel Silverstein," witty and surreal, by turns satirical and playful, and often in rhyme. Even the table of contents/menu of *Frankenstein* ... will make you smile with titles such as "The Lunchsack of Notre Dame," "The Invisible Man Gets a Haircut," and "The Mummy Won't Go To His Eternal Rest Without a Story and Some Cookies."

Words and the way they sound certainly matter to this artist.

But so do images. His best-selling children's book, *Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich,* is filled with hilarious mixed media sight and word

"JUST BECAUSE YOU MIGHT BE A MONSTER, THAT DOESN'T MEAN LIFE IS GOING TO BE ALL TERRIFIED VILLAGERS AND BITING. THERE'S ALWAYS A DOWN SIDE. MONSTERS HAVE PROBLEMS TOO."

gags: Dracula with spinach in his teeth and Zombies doing Sambas.

Even the author's bio and photo get special treatment. First, an editor wrote: "Adam Rex hasn't appeared in any poems that mention his name, his wife, and the city where he lives." Adam wrote the following limerick in reply, which completed the bio.

When his editor asked, he said "Madam,"
You would throw 'em away if I had 'em.
Philadelphia's fine,
And Marie is divine
But you know nothing good
Rhymes with Adam.

If you think he's leaning too far toward the literary side, relax and take a look at the jacket flap. You'll see a self-portrait of the artist—as a young Frankenstein, wearing horn-rimmed glasses.

The book's interior illustrations are filled with similar hilarious details and references to movie and graphic art/cartoon icons, including the characters of Charles M. Schulz, horror movie classics, and even a wink and nod to the Charles Dana Gibson illustrations and tabloid scandal sheets popular in Victorian England.

Of the latter, Adam says, "It was my favorite in the book. 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Henderson.' It had the longest, most complex rhyme scheme. I couldn't believe it worked."

According to Adam, despite his artistic training, words often come first. "I had been sort of writing monster poems off and on over the course of a few years. When I realized I wanted to write a collection of monster poems, it was after I came up with the title for the book. And sandwich is a funny word.

"I think that two separate versions of these iconic monsters exist for most people. The decorative Halloween version and the literary version. Obviously, I was dealing with the former. And I wanted to focus on monsters with very mundane problems, but problems that nonetheless seemed monster-appropriate, for example, vampires with spinach stuck between their teeth would not be able to pull off the sexy monster vampire effect, and so on."

"If the old saying tells us that tragedy plus time equals comedy, I think that scary plus time must equal comedy as well. Scary and funny seem to be connected as it is, and when the newness and the surprise and mystery of fear fades, I think it leaves behind a lot of loose ends in our heads that get picked up by the part of the brain that handles funny. In the end a figure like Dracula gets metaphorically de-fanged."

Adam began his professional artful endeavors at Comic Con, hoping to break into the frenetic world of comic book art and writing. But his interest in art started long before San Diego, and he always thought he

Count Dracula
Doesn't Know He's
Been Walking Around
All Night with Spinach
in His Teeth
Will someone please just tell him? It looks so undignified.
The zombies almost mentioned it. The Headless Horseman tried.
But when he said, "What are you staring at?" they lost their nerve and lied.
It's been stuck in there for hours now. It's getting kind of sick.
I would offer him a toothpick, but he gets this nervous tic
if you ever come to close with any kind of pointed stick.
Well, really. Can you blame us if we don't know what to say?
His castle has no mirrors, so I guess it's there to stay.
What was a vampire doing eating spinach anyway?

would aim for writing and illustrating children's books.

"I think I knew from the age of 16 or 17 on that I wanted to do kids books. I went to University of Arizona to study under the author illustrator David Christiana, and went to the San Diego Comic Con looking for cover work. It's where I got my start in illustration. I fell into role-playing and trading-card art by accident."

He confesses that he did grow up playing *D&D* as a kid, and reading fantasy, so he was prepared for his gig with Wizards of the Coast. As an artist he's had to shift his style and format from fantasy cards to children's books.

"Of course there are differences in illustrating children's books versus fantasy: differences in tone, in character's action, in maturity."

He describes his fantasy style as "subtle and quiet." But he's quick to say that he enjoys other styles as well. "I love Frank Frazetta. And I think many people in fantasy art push those tropes much farther than he ever did. But I try to avoid that. I am making an effort to brighten my palette in both fantasy and kid's books. Jon Foster was one of the artists who especially inspired me to change my palette, which tends toward more darker earth tones."

Adam received the Jack Gaughan

GRATUITY and J.LO Present:
10 Reasons to Read
THE TRUE MEANING OF SMEKDAY
I'M NOT DOING THIS, J.LO.
REASON ONE! IT IS BIG AND SQUAREY AND WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU ARE NO DOING THIS?
I DON'T WANT PEOPLE READING ABOUT THAT YEAR, REMEMBER?
IT'S MORTIFYING.
REASON TWO: HILARIOUSLY MORTIFYING!
OK, FINE. REASON THREE: IT'S WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY ADAM REX.
NOBODY LIKES THAT GUY.
HIS NAME MEANS, "TERRIBLE MAN-LIZARD."
AND REASON FOUR! WHY IS IT ONLY $16.99 IN THE US BUT IT COSTS $21.99 IN CANADA?
$21.99
$16.99
TAKE THAT, CANADIANS!
HOW LONG UNTIL THIS THING COMES OUT, ANYWAY?
IS TO BE ING RELEASED 10/2/2007 HYPERION.
HYPERION? IT SOUNDS LIKE A TRANSFORMING ROBOT.
IS PUBLISHED BY TRANSFORMING ROBOTS!
REASON SIX I'M ONLY BELIEVE AND I DRIVE A CAR IN IT. TERRIBLE
REASON SEVEN: ISBN 0-7868-4900-2
AND BESIDES— IT'S FULL OF LASER GUNS AND SPACESHIPS AND, LIKE, PEOPLE TELEPORTING AND STUFF
DIDN'T YOU GET ENOUGH OF THAT AT STAR TREK?

drama than actually occurs naturally."

Despite his pop culture references he looks to the early 20th century for inspiration. "I'm really very into early 20th century illustration so I derive a lot of inspiration from that, and from artists like N.C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle, Frank Schoonover, and the Brandywine School. But I also admire many contemporary artists, including those I share stuff with via the Internet."

Adam concedes that the Internet in general takes a lot of time away from his writing and his art. Check out his insanely creative and interesting website/blog, www.adamrex.com, and you'll see why. His website is set up as a poultry chart: click on the drumstick and learn about his fantasy work, click on the tailfeathers and discover his children's books. As much fun as it is to travel around the chicken parts, his blog is equally interesting. You'll find entry to it via the "Abraham SuperLincoln Compass," the first screen on his site. Abraham SuperLincoln, by the way, is a character whom Adam has invented and looks forward to writing about.

"The blog is pleasing in a way that a website isn't," he says. "For example, on it I was able to post an answer to somebody's question that really satisfied me. It's interactivity is very pleasant, very compelling."

Before he gets to SuperLincoln, Adam has to finish work on *Frankenstein Makes a Sequel*. Look for more surreal, funny situations with monsters. As he recently commented in the Ironic Sans blog, "Just because you might be a monster, that doesn't mean life is going to be all terrified villagers and biting. There's always a down side. Monsters have problems too." ❧

Award for best emerging artist in 2005, has appeared in *Spectrum* 11-14, and co-judged *Spectrum* 14. In September he had the pleasure of seeing two books published at once, his first novel, *The True Meaning of Smekday*, which includes several heavily illustrated short comic sequences in black and white from Hyperion, and *Pssst*, a girl's day at the zoo and the demands that all the animals make of her, with full-page and panel art, from Harcourt.

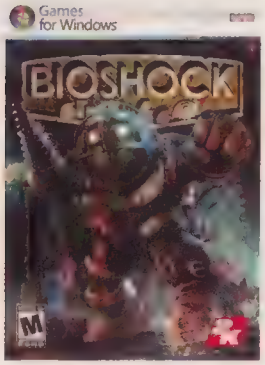
"When I'm able to come up with a sentence or a paragraph that nobody's written before, it's a thrill I haven't gotten out of painting for a while."

On the other hand, he admits that he has yet to master oil painting, much less other media. "I admire the hell out of good watercolor artists. That medium almost borders on religion, on faith. In oil, you can maintain control, drink a little too much coffee, get out some really small brushes, and just paint over whatever you didn't like."

"I'll often do oils over digital sketches. I can make a lot of early color decisions in the forgiving realm of digital work. In fact, I have to remind myself that you can make choices and portray more

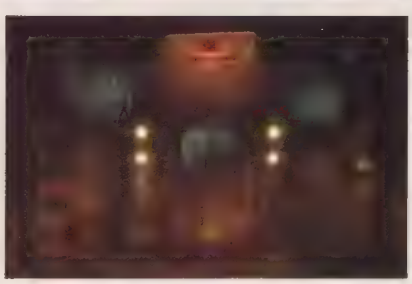
By Eric T. Baker

BioShock from 2K Games is easily one of the top 10 RPGs of all time.



This issue starts with three computer role-playing games. The best of them, and the best game of 2007, is ***BioShock*** for the PC and Xbox 360 from 2K Games. In form, *BioShock* actually blurs the line between a first-person shooter and an RPG. Combat is twitch-based and the perspective is down the barrel of whatever gun is equipped, but at the same time, the player's character is very customizable. In addition there is a crafting system, mini games, and a large skill system. On top of it all, the game is very story driven. So despite the first-person perspective, it feels like a role-playing game.

Set in 1960, the player takes the role of a victim of a mid-Atlantic plane crash. Coincidentally(?), the player finds himself swimming right near the entrance to an undersea city named Rapture. Built after World War II by an Ayn Rand-style businessman named Andrew Ryan, Rapture has fallen from its heyday and is now much more hellish than heavenly. The player is pulled into the same struggle for survival faced by the remaining citizens, a struggle complicated by a wonder substance, EVE, which permits extensive, and ultimately dangerous, biomodification.



There is a lot of fighting and shooting in *BioShock*. There are a lot of things to loot and many things to spend the loot on. The world of Rapture is huge, so there is a lot to explore. All that said, it is the spooky, Art Deco environment, and the deep, compelling mystery story that have made the game so deservedly popular. The story is told mostly in taped recordings that are

The undersea city of Rapture, which has decayed into a kind of Art Deco hell, is the setting for BioShock. *The player joins the remaining citizens in a battle for survival against dozens of monsters.*

Eos Books—The Next Chapter

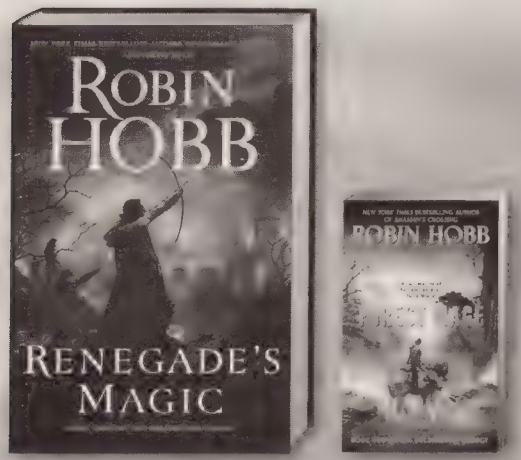
1998-2008

A Decade of the Finest Fantasy and Science Fiction in the Universe

Renegades's Magic

Book Three of The Soldier Son Trilogy

Robin Hobb

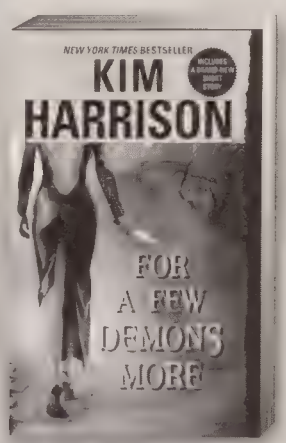


The extraordinary adventure begun in *Shaman's Crossing* continues!

"A master fantasist."
—*Baltimore Sun*

For a Few Demons More

Kim Harrison



"Her work can read like a smoldering combination of Alice Waters and Ozzy Osbourne."
—*New York Times Book Review*

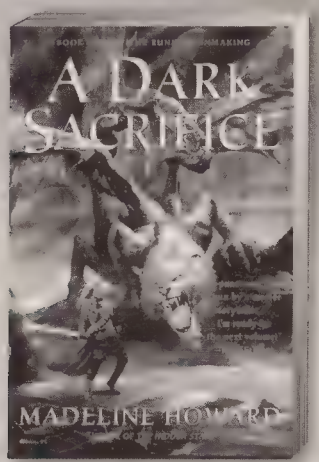
Visit **www.eosbooks.com**. While there, sign up for our e-newsletter ***Inside Eos*** to get updates and exclusive material sent directly to you each month. Can't wait? Head over to our blog at **www.outofthiseos.com** or to Eos Books on MySpace—**www.myspace.com/eosbooks**.

For more information about the Eos 10-Year Anniversar visit www.eosbooks10.com

A Dark Sacrifice

Book Two of The Rune of Unmaking

Madeline Howard

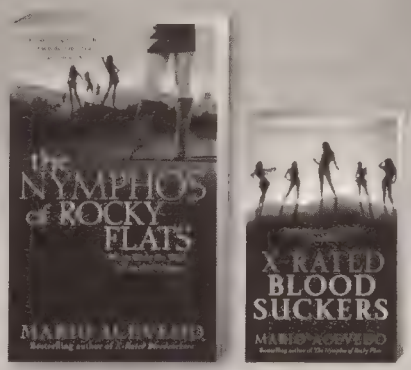


The second book in the exciting *Rune of Unmaking* trilogy.

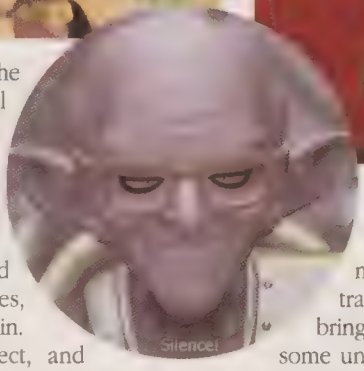
"A gripping fantasy epic."
—*Library Journal*

The Nymphos of Rocky Flats

Mario Acevedo



"Acevedo has proven once again that he is a very disturbed man—and I mean that in the absolute finest sense of the term."
—Tim Dorsey



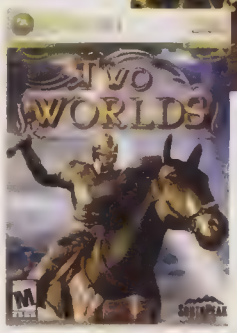
scattered throughout the city. They are well told, well acted, and well placed so that each one builds on the others in a way that the player's perception of the world around him changes, and then changes again.

No game is perfect, and *BioShock* has its flaws. Each level introduces new monsters and new features (customizing weapons, researching the monsters, different vending machines, etc.), but even so, the game is so big that players will spend lots of time killing many of the same monsters and solving many of the same mini games in exactly of the same ways. The game can be completed very rapidly and linearly: not only are there clear objectives on each level, but there are also hints and a big honking arrow right on the interface to point the player to the objective. Following the arrow, however, would make the player blow past a lot of story. *BioShock* won't hold players on the edges of their seats for all of its tens of hours of possible gameplay, but it grips their attention and repays the effort it takes to play. It is easily one of the top 10 RPGs of all time.

Not on that list of top 10 RPGs is ***Blue Dragon,*** a Japanese-style RPG from Mistwalker for the Xbox 360. Unlike most of the Japanese-style role-playing games reviewed in this column over the years, *BD* was created from an enormous budget. There are three game disks in the box. The game requires that many disks because there are so many full-motion, 3-D, fully voiced (players pick English, Japanese, or French for the dialogue) CGI cut scenes in the game. Almost every important story point in the game has its own cut scene.

The cut scenes are the good news. The bad news is that, in contrast to *BioShock*'s story, which brings an interesting setting as well as some unforeseen twists and turns to the usual gaming plotline, *BD* is the usual story without any surprising twists or even an engaging background. Like *Final Fantasy* and many games before and since, the protagonist of *BD* is a young boy who sets out to save his village and his world from the predations of an evil overlord. He is joined on his quest by others until he finally has a party of five to face the many, many turn-based battles. The only major difference here is that the characters accumulate levels and skill slots individually; the skills themselves are found by the party as a whole and are almost like items in how they can be traded around among the characters in between battles.

Players for whom *BD* will be their first Japanese RPG will probably enjoy the game because its production values are extremely high, and its game mechanics are easy to grasp and employ. Players who aren't new, though, will find themselves on well-traveled ground, and for them, that will detract from the game's many strong elements.



Which brings things to ***Two Worlds*** for the PC and Xbox 360 (and soon for the PS3) from SouthPeak Interactive. *TW* is a traditional American RPG, although it was created by Reality Pump, a Polish development house. *TW* is their first RPG, and players won't be very far into it when they are struck by how much it reminds them of *Oblivion*. The player takes the role of a single, extremely customizable (in everything but gender and looks) avatar and runs him in a nonlinear fashion through a huge fantasy world with a multitude of quests.

Like *BioShock*, but unlike *Blue Dragon*, players can save their game anywhere in *TW*: before each combat or before they make any large purchase or whenever a spouse calls for their attention, to cite three excellent times for saving the game. This ability and the game's development system are its greatest assets. Players advance their character's stats, skills, and spells. There are no classes, so the player is free to build a character who fights in any way he pleases, from a lock-picking thief to a fire-throwing sorcerer to some combination of the magic, melee, range, and utility.

While all three of these role-playing games devote a tremendous amount of time to the finding of and putting to use of loot, *TW* is the one where carrying all the character finds is a large issue. A player who tries to pick up everything will find the character's inventory full before he is halfway between the first quest and the second. The answer to this is horses, which can be ridden from place

THERE ARE WORLDS BEYOND OUR OWN –
THE COMPASS WILL SHOW THE WAY.
THE GOLDEN COMPASS
PREMIUM TRADING CARDS
this exciting fantasy adventure is set in a parallel world where people's souls manifest themselves as small animals, talking bears fight wars, and children are mysteriously disappearing. The film is based on the first book of Philip Pullman's best-selling, award-winning trilogy, 'His Dark Materials'.
Inkworks captures all of the action and amazing worlds in this 72-base card set. Look for 5 levels of outstanding, randomly-inserted bonus cards:
'TRUTH TELLING' cards
Lenticular cards capturing the movement of the alethiometer.
'LYRA'S WORLD' cards
3-D lenticular cards share the fantastic world that Lyra lives in.
'FIGHT TO THE DEATH' cards
Capturing the amazing battle between the fighting bears Iorek and Ragnar.
'DÆMON FORMS' cards
Capturing Lyra, Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel and their dæmons.
COMING TO THEATRES
DECEMBER 2007
CARDS COMING NOVEMBER 2007
Inkworks
For more information, check out WWW.INKWORKS.COM

Michael Whelan

Image Size: 19" x 23" *Edition: 550, S/N*

"Landing"

An Original Limited Edition Lithograph

Master science fiction artist Michael Whelan has won 11 Hugo Awards for Best Fantasy/Science Fiction Artist, along with the Super Hugo for Best Professional Artist in the past 50 years.

In 1995 Michael was commissioned by the Fantasy 500 Collectors Consortium to create "Landing," an original lithograph, as part of their *Passage to Sanctuary Series*.

This beautiful image was created by Michael using a combination of traditional and digital techniques to create the final digital "painting." The image was then transferred directly to the lithographic printing process. The digital original was destroyed when printing was complete, so that the image only exists on these limited edition prints. Only 555 lithograph sets were created, and many of them have already been purchased by collectors. Only a very few remain.

Sovereign Collections has acquired 33 of the remaining lithographs, and is offering these prints at a reduced price to the discriminating collector.

Created on 100% cotton archival paper, utilizing up to twenty colors of special light-fast inks, each lithograph is signed and numbered by Michael Whelan.

For a limited time these prints are being offered at the substantially reduced price of $195, including shipping and handling.

To order, telephone toll free:

1-800-219-1187

VISA and MasterCard accepted. To order by mail, send your check, money order or credit card number (please include expiration date and signature) to the address below.

Sovereign Collections
1000 Commerce Park Drive, Suite 300
Williamsport, PA 17701

to place and used as pack animals. In actual play, the character spends most of his time traveling via the many teleport nodes, so horses see more use as storage bins that are left in the various towns until the player needs some particular piece of gear.

With its action combat system and its rough around the edges animation, *TW* is not for everyone. It is for players who enjoy fantasy role playing with an action combat system who don't want to pay the monthly fee for an MMO. Players who finished *Oblivion* and are now ready for more of the same, only different, should pick up *TW*.

Halo 3, for the Xbox 360 from Bungie Software, is definitely not an RPG. The Master Chief, the hero of the game and the player's character, doesn't have skills or stats for the player to modify and improve. As the game progresses the character will have access to different weapons, equipment, and vehicles, but the skill to employ them properly comes purely from the player and his hand-eye coordination. How much skill the player needs is determined by what difficulty he decides to play at.

Perhaps the best thing about *H3* is that not only does it finish the story started in the previous two games, but it also makes sense of the ending of the second game. There is a fair amount of story to the game, and there are almost as many cut scenes as in *BD*. These scenes are mostly done in the game engine, so the game only needs one disk, but the package includes a second disk for all the bonus content and new level-building system. In any case, the story is not as immersing as *BioShock's*, but since the majority of players will already have two full games' worth of commitment to these characters, it is still pretty powerful.

Despite the upgraded graphics, *H3* feels like coming back to an old friend. There is essentially no learning curve for people who played *H2*. There are new vehicles and new guns and an entire suite of new equipment, but really the game plays and feels the same. The one big change is that the campaign game can now be played cooperatively over Xbox live by up to four players. Obviously, death matching is the ruling multiplayer sport for fps games, but co-op play is an underrated pleasure, and the ability to share it with three friends makes it more than worth the cover price.

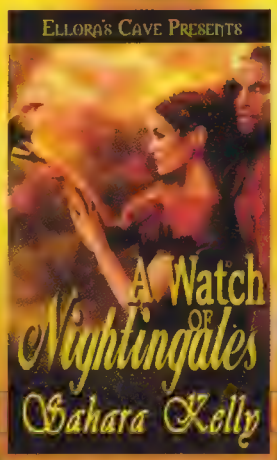
Of course, when it comes to sharing story with friends, there really is no substitute for face-to-face, paper-and-dice role playing. Although in the case of ***Primetime Adventures***, a 106-page softcover rulebook by Matt Wilson of Dog-Eared Designs, it is actually a case of pen and token and playing card role-playing. Using the rules and those few tools, the game unlocks the players' imaginations to let them cooperatively create, write, and star in a season of an imaginary TV show.

The mechanics of *PTA* are elegantly simple. One player takes the role of the producer, and the other players take the roles of the main characters in a prime time TV show. The show can be anything from a kids' sitcom to a Masterpiece Theater-style drama to a furry space opera. *PTA* gives structure to the creation of the series and its episodes, but the content is whatever the players can imagine. The most important part of the game is the pitch, where all the players gather and decide what show it is they want to play. This is different from most RPGs where

Ellora's Cave Presents

Ebooks for Valentine's Day

When a Woman's Fantasies Turn to Love



www.ellorascave.com www.cerridwenpress.com

Ellora's Cave books contain adult material not suitable for anyone under 18

Take Your Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Writing to the Next Level at

Odyssey

THE SUMMER FANTASY WRITING WORKSHOP

June 9 - July 18, 2008

- Intensive sessions on plot, character, world building
- Detailed feedback on your writing
- Learn how to get published

Six weeks of directed study with Jeanne Cavelos, former Senior Editor at Bantam Doubleday Dell and winner of the World Fantasy Award.

WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE:
NANCY KRESS

Guest Lecturers:
ELLEN KUSHNER
DELIA SHERMAN
CRAIG SHAW GARDNER
JAMES MAXEY
JENNY RAPPAPORT

Held at Saint Anselm College
Manchester, NH

Application deadline: April 10

Visit: www.odysseyworkshop.org
Or call (603) 673-6234

the GM arrives with a world ready to present. In *PTA, the* premise is a group effort and the best games come when the players take the time to make sure they have an idea that everyone is not just okay with, but actually excited about.

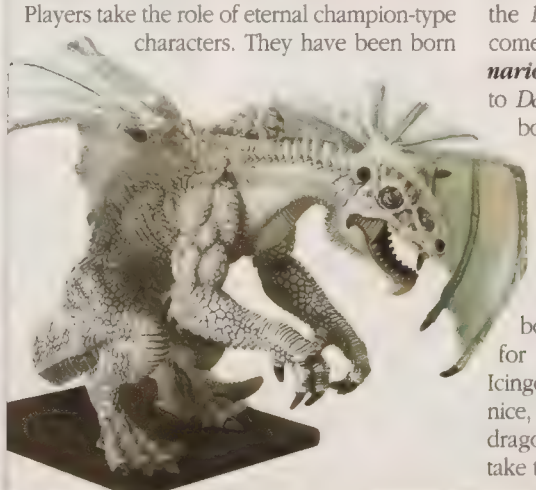
The actual play of *PTA*, the creating of episodes and scenes, is just as collaborative as the initial decision on what show to make, but things no longer depend ofnconsensus. Drama comes from conflict, so the players are encouraged to get their characters into some physical as well as emotional conflicts. The mechanics then allow for the conflicts to be resolved, but in such a way that even the "losers" win. *PTA* is a completely story-driven and story-friendly RPG. It is also completely open to people who don't consider themselves role-players because the idea of creating a TV show is much less radical to people than is the idea of creating a wizard to go dungeon crawling. This is a game that longtime role-players and complete newcomers can enjoy together.

Fury, for the PC from Australian developer Auran, is a purely player vs. player MMO. Players take the role of eternal champion-type characters. They have been born to fight again and again down through history, but now it is the end times and they have all been collected together to save what is left of the world. As the characters progress, they don't "learn" skills, but rather they "remember" them. The gaining of each skill is accompanied by a nice text piece about the moment in a previous life when the character mastered the skill.

Within the game, only the characters' gender and name are fixed. They can change their looks and (more importantly) their skill load out at any time between battles. There are eight broad character classes, but the names only assign based on what element most of the character's equipped skills are in, and if there are more ranged or melee ones. It is possible to mix and match the skills into whatever configuration works best for the player, and for the group he is in. Players can save a certain number of skill load outs and switch between these saves with the press of a button.

In a player vs. environment MMO, as most MMOs are, the goals are to level and to explore the world. In *Fury* the goal is to level (so the character can load more skills at once) and to climb the challenge ladders of the various PvP game types, both as individuals and groups. The servers match players of equal level and rank in battles, and the places on the ladders are based on the player's top 10 results, so a few bad matches, or not enough matches, don't automatically kill players in the rankings. *Fury* is a very fast paced, very engaging experience with no monthly fee, which makes it perfect for jumping on and having a fight or three whenever there is time.

One quick mention to close things out. For the *Dungeons & Dragons Minatures Game* comes ***D&D Icons: Legend of Drizzt Scenario Pack.*** Drizzt Do'Urden was introduced to *D&D* lore 20 years ago in R.A. Salvatore's book, *The Crystal Shard.* This pack contains a new miniature of Drizzt, one of his barbarian friend Wulfgar, and one of the gargantuan white dragon Icingdeath. There is also a battle map, five stat cards, and a scenario book for recreating the quest for and the battle against Icingdeath. All of which is quite nice, but really, it is the full-size dragon that will make players take the box home. ❧



FINDING
THE RELIC
IS A DIVINE QUEST.
EVEN IF IT MEANS
COMMITTING
MURDER.
ON MARCH 11,
DISCOVER PROVENANCE
ROGUE
Angel
AleX
Archer
ROGUE
Angel
AleX
Archer
PROVENANCE
GOLD
EAGLE
WITH ART BY
TIM BRADSTREET
AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD.

ARRIVAL

an original limited edition lithograph by

MICHAEL WHELAN

In 1995, Master science fiction artist Michael Whelan was commissioned to create "Arrival," an original lithograph, as part of their Passage to Sanctuary Series.

This beautiful image was created by Mr. Whelan using a combination of traditional and digital techniques. The image only exists on these limited edition prints. Only 555 lithograph sets were created and only a very few remain.

Sovereign Collec-tions has acquired a very few of the remaining lithographs, and is offering these prints at a reduced price to the discriminating collector.

Created on 100% cotton archival paper, utilizing up to twenty colors of special light fast inks, each lithograph is signed and numbered by Michael Whelan.

For a limited time these prints are being offered at the substantially reduced price of $195, including shipping and handling.

To order, telephone toll free:

1-800-219-1187

Visa and MasterCard are accepted. To order by mail, send your check, money order or credit card number (please include expiration date and signature) to the address below.

Sovereign Collections
1000 Commerce Park Drive, Suite 300, Williamsport, PA 17701

the flock

Continued from page 67

breath stinking of blood. It whimpered, then tore at its fur, and Eithne crouched next to him. She clawed at his robe, then stared at the wound beneath. "No! I'll do anything—I'll let you say the words at me, splash that water on my head, just don't go!"

"Eithne," he said, or tried to say. *Find a priest,* he wanted to say, *as you did before for Maire.*

Instead she screamed, a woman's cry that no one would ever mistake for a wolf's, and pulled her pelt over her shoulders, retreating into the wolf's shape. He closed his eyes as she twisted, seeming to gnaw at her own fur—then opened them in pain and shock as she shoved her muzzle against the gash in his stomach, burrowing, biting, tickling—

Tickling. Fur. Fur tickled on his stomach, spreading out from the gash that even now was starting to close, prickling his skin, sprouting on hands and paws and muzzle. He convulsed, pain shooting through him as his bones reshaped. Blood leaked from between his teeth, and the teeth themselves ground against each other, shifting position. He choked and coughed, expelling the last of the blood from his lungs, and rolled to his feet.

Four feet.

Eithne stared at him, her gaze golden and scared. "I couldn't let you go," she said.

He looked down at his paws and back at his hindquarters, at the alien balance shifting along his tail. "Cursed," he whispered, lisping through the thicket of teeth.

Cursed. Conriocht. Demon.

"I couldn't. They don't—" She tossed her head as if snapping at a fly. "They don't even know any good stories."

They don't know any stories. Something burned inside him, and for a moment he mistook it for the curse. But instead the light flickered within him, kindling to a new life, as his own life had rekindled. They don't know any stories. Not even the tickly ones.

A flock of wolves? Heresy, the bishop would have said, but the bishop wasn't here ...

"You can stay now. You don't have to go all the way to Rome." She ducked her head in a gesture that he recognized from her human shape. "You can stay with me."

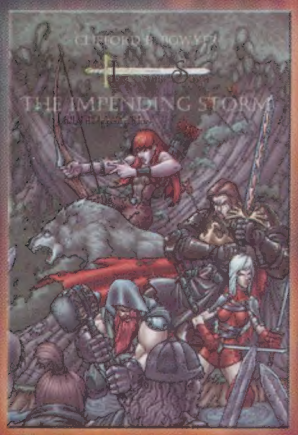
I can stay. Maire's gift to her—to us both.

He looked back to the bloodied ruin of his clothing and nosed at it. His cross was still there, darkened by his own blood, and he pawed at the cord, shoving his head against it, until it dangled clumsily over his head, caught on one ear.

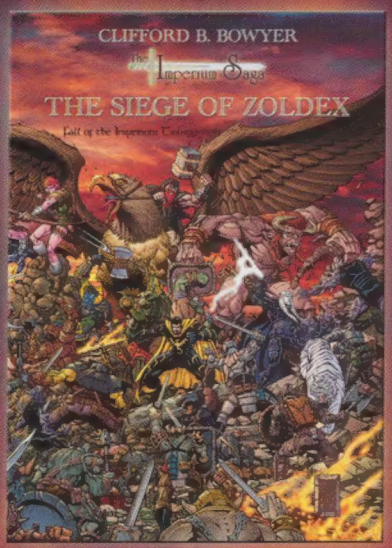
Where we are called, he remembered, *is not always where we are sent.* He stretched, marveling in the new arrangement of sinews, and the cross fell into place. "Thank you," he said, and this time it came out more easily. "Which way is the village?"

CLIFFORD B. BOWYER'S The Imperium Saga

The WAR for the Imperium has begun...



THE IMPENDING STORM



THE SIEGE OF ZOLDEX

THE CHANGING TIDES

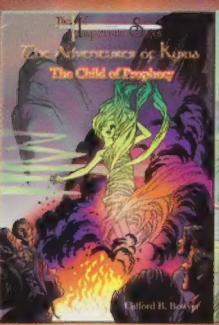
Experience the intense finale of this epic fantasy trilogy!

Looking for more Imperium Saga adventures?

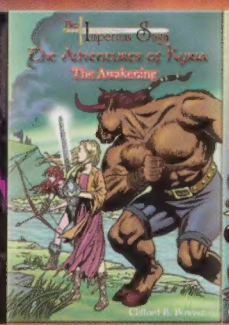
The Adventures of Kyria

A Young adult spin-off of The Imperium Saga

In a time of great darkness, when evil sweeps the land, a prophecy foretells the coming of a savior, a child that will defeat the forces of evil and save the world. She is Kyria, the Chosen One.



The Child of Prophecy



The Awakening

The Mage's Council

The Shard of Time

Trapped in Time

Quest for the Shard

The Spread of Darkness

www.SilverLeafBooks.com

SILVER LEAF BOOKS

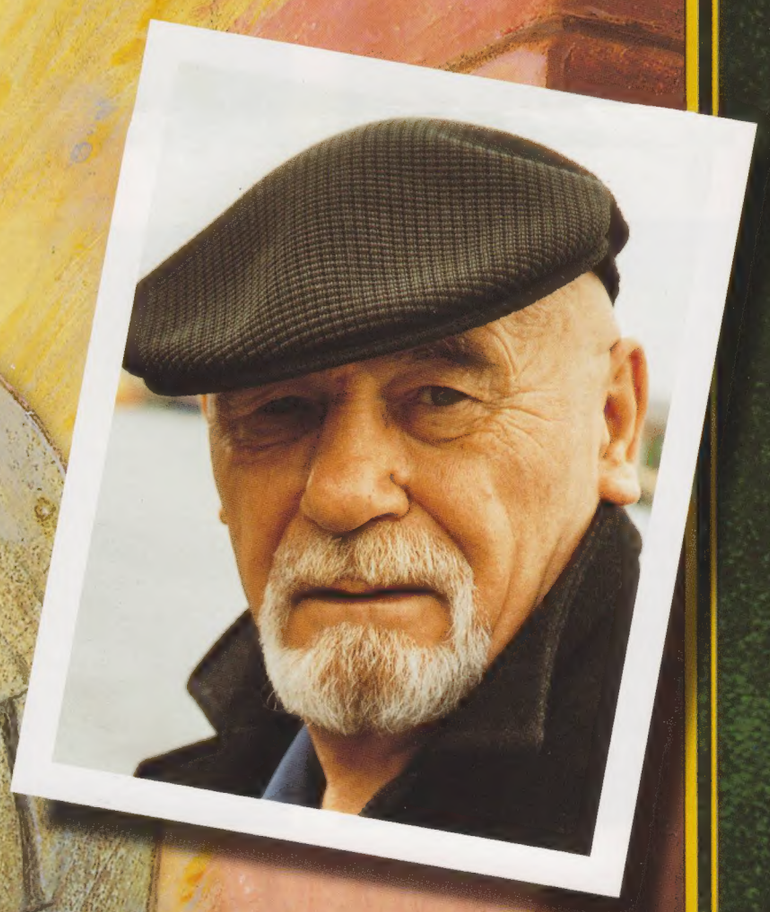
www.CliffordBBowyer.com

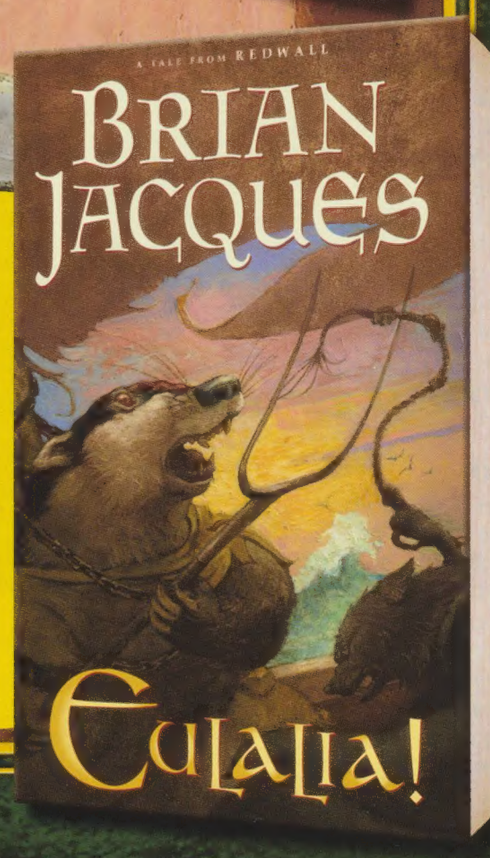
CELEBRATE 20 YEARS OF

REDWALL

The *New York Times*
Bestselling Series by

BRIAN JACQUES



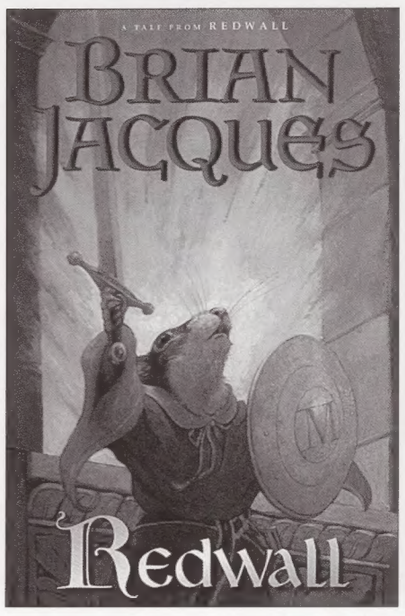


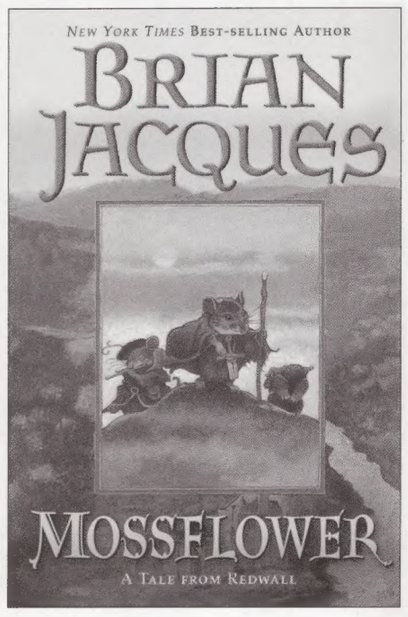
Read the newest REDWALL adventure!

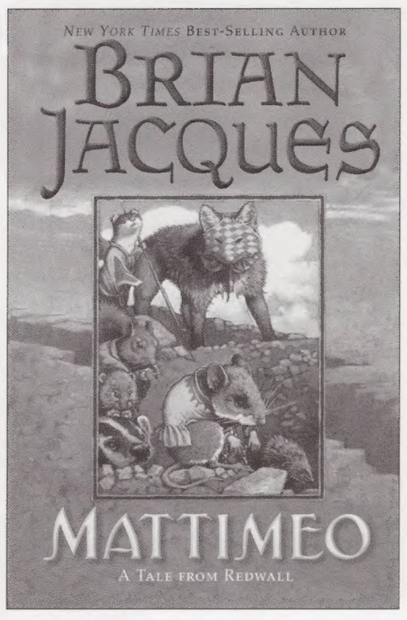
Philomel Books • Firebird
Divisions of Penguin Young Readers Group
www.penguin.com/youngreaders • www.firebirdbooks.com

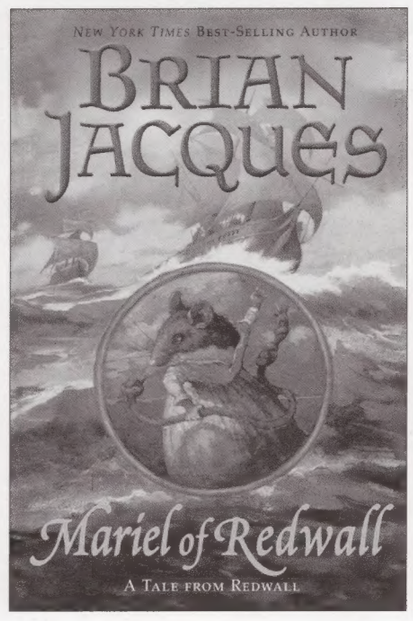
Cover illustration © Troy Howell, 2007
Photo credit © David Jacques

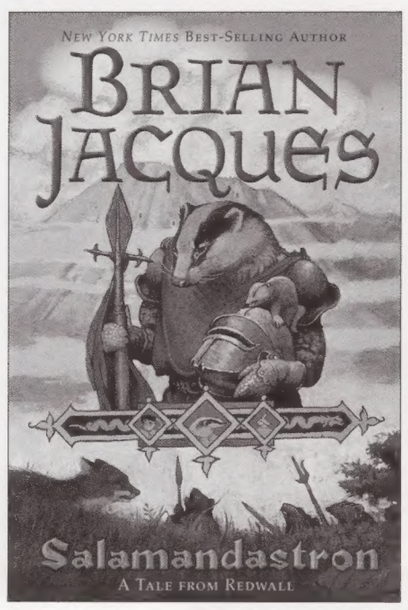
Don't miss any of the adventures in the Redwall series...

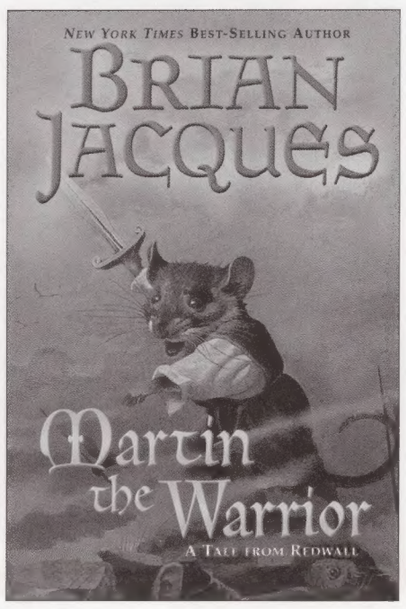


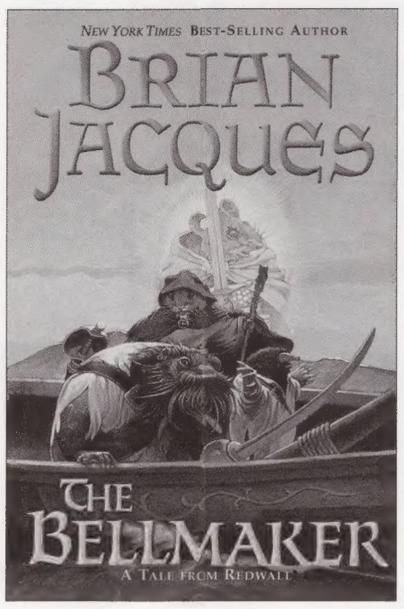


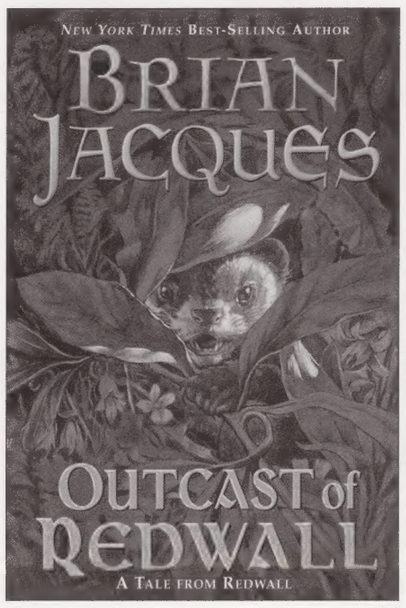


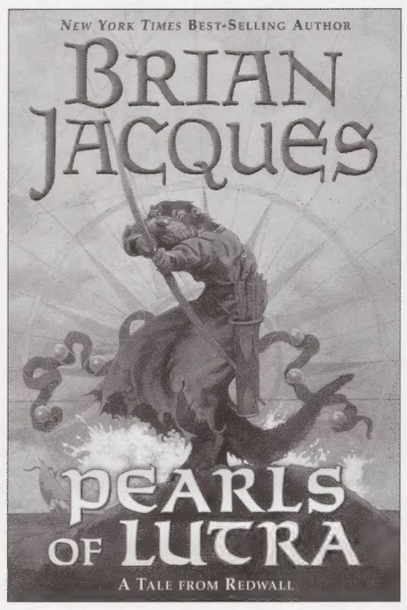


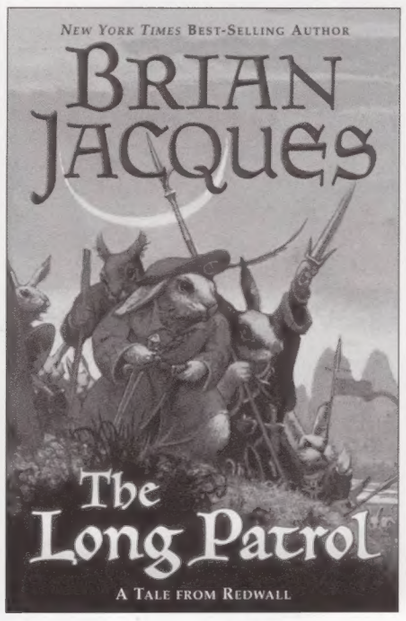


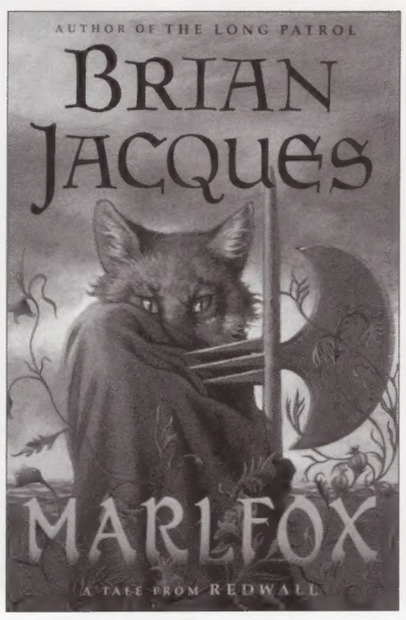


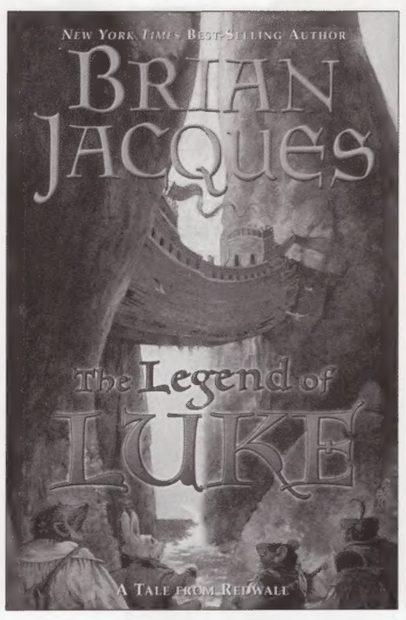


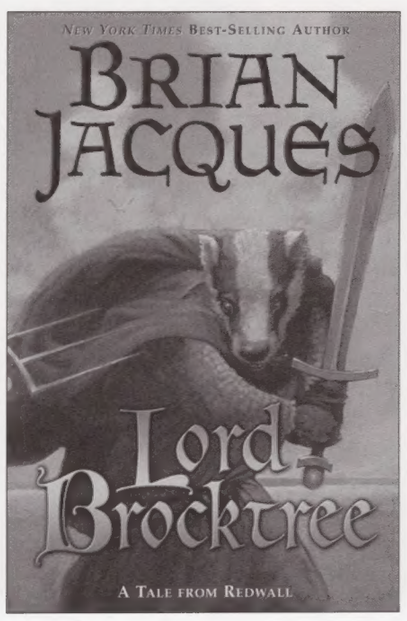


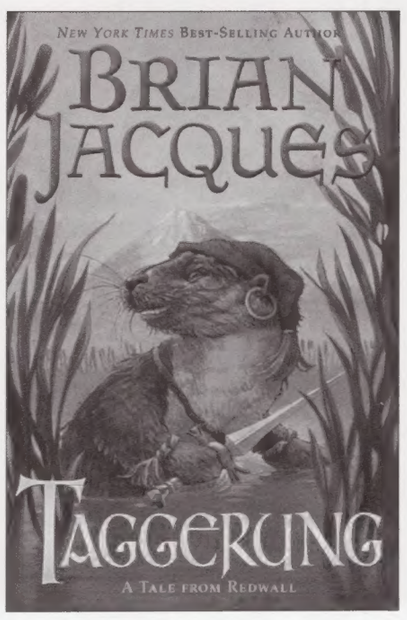


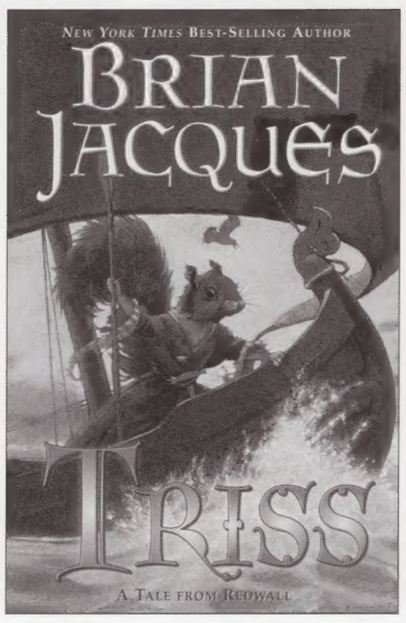


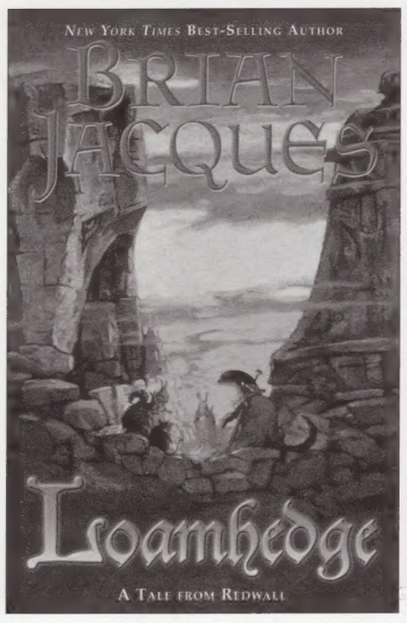


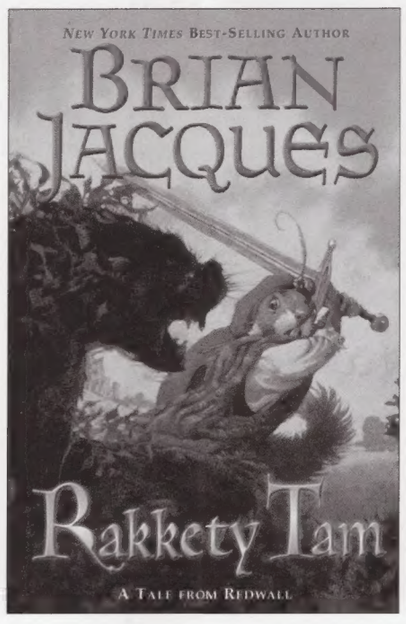


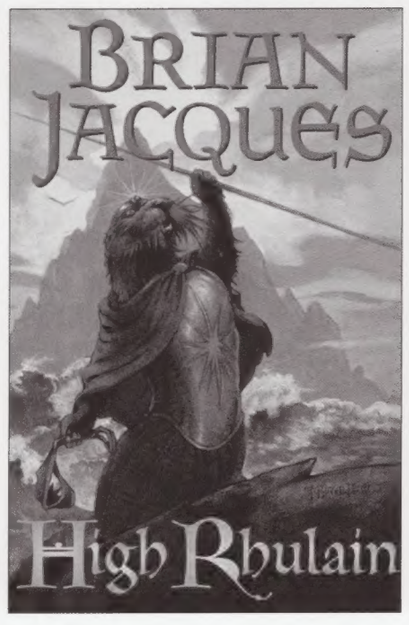


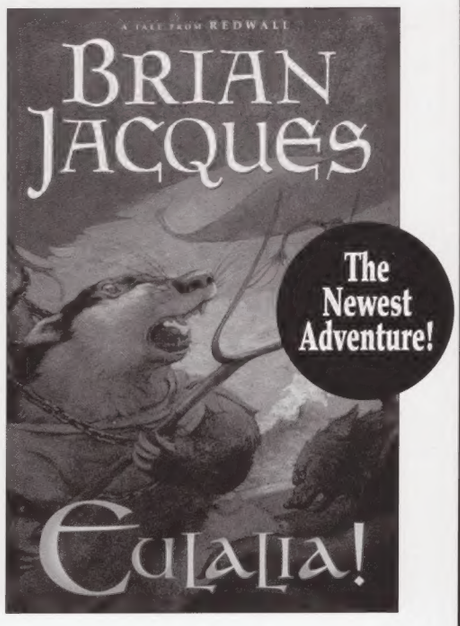












Philomel Books • Firebird
Divisions of Penguin Young Readers Group
www.penguin.com/youngreaders • www.firebirdbooks.com

Introducing

Beka Cooper

A New Tortall Trilogy from *New York Times* Bestselling Author

Tamora Pierce

Let the journey begin . . . Go back 200 years before Alanna was born and discover the world of Beka Cooper, a tough new heroine who can hear the voices of the dead.

NOW IN PAPERBACK!

"[Pierce fans] will savor every page"—*Publishers Weekly*

"Enormously popular, Pierce is a best-selling and prolific author . . . loved for her strong female heroines and quasi-medieval magical realms."—*The New York Times*

RHCB www.randomhouse.com/teens/strangelands

Sign up for the *Strange Lands Science Fiction and Fantasy Newsletter*, and get the inside scoop on your favorite authors and hottest books!